Now You're Thinking with Real Science

by Jaywings

Summary

A former test subject, now free, takes up residence in a strange town where almost nothing is considered abnormal. A year later, a young paranormal enthusiast spots two odd new satellites orbiting the moon and immediately makes plans to bring them to Earth, firmly believing that the two metal spheres are alien in origin. Because, after all, what else could they possibly be?
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
A single pinprick of light softened the muggy darkness down the road at the edge of town, growing brighter as it approached. It stood out stronger than the dim street lamps lining the sidewalk—one might wonder whether anyone had ever bothered to change the light bulbs in them after they had initially been installed who knew how many years ago. High above, the full moon hung in the sky like a glowing white lantern.

The traveling light on the ground became the flickering headlamp of an ancient, dented pick-up truck that emerged from the soupy night. It may once have been blue but the paint had long since chipped or rusted away, and it looked as if it shouldn't be able to stand on its four wheels let alone drive. The truck crawled to the side of the road and jerked to a shuddering stop.

"This is as far outta my way as I can go," the stick-thin driver of said truck stated around a mouthful of gum. "You'll be okay?"

The woman sitting next to him gave a brief nod and awkwardly unbuckled her seatbelt around the large, cumbersome-looking box she held clutched in her lap. Before opening the door, she managed a grateful smile at the driver as a silent way of thanking him. The smile, stilted and pulling sideways, betrayed the fact that she wasn't used to doing it. He seemed to understand.

"No problem," he said with a dip of his head. "And good luck." The man turned, peering out the driver-side window at the surrounding city with an uneasy look. "I've heard weird things about this town. Don't come here much. But…" He once again turned his gaze to the woman and cracked a grin of his own. "You seem like you've got a good head on your shoulders. You'll be fine."

The woman's mouth tightened (perhaps in another attempt at a smile) and she slid out of the car at last. The driver gave a slight wave before pulling away once more, the truck's one remaining headlight winking as if it threatened to go out at any time. All signs of the truck were swallowed up by the dark almost immediately.

The air was heavy and humid and felt almost suffocating when inhaled. The woman, still clasping the strange cube—although the strain it produced due to its weight was obvious—straightened up and took in her surroundings with narrowed blue-gray eyes. Her long, dark hair, streaked with silvery gray in a few places despite her youth, was pulled back from her face in a sloppy ponytail. Her eyes were bright and focused, contrasting completely with her gaunt face. Physically, she looked underfed and exhausted, as evidenced by the dark violet circles beneath her eyes. She looked frail, although if someone had told her that they likely would have woken up by the side of the road with a new lump on their head.
The odd orange jumpsuit and white tank top she wore were grubby and tattered while her stark white and black boots, with curved metal springs in the backs that kept her on perpetual tiptoe, were scuffed and discolored around the bottoms from their contact with all manner of chemicals and toxins. The cube she held was in even worse shape than she was. It may have been white at some point, or light gray, with pink hearts painted on each side. Now it was dirty, chipped, and charred as if someone had left it in a fire.

Nevertheless, the woman's entire body radiated an air of confidence. Anyone could tell from a mere glance that she was much stronger than she might appear and wouldn't hesitate to confirm that theory should the need arise.

From where she stood, just by the light of the street lamps sprinkled along the sidewalk and the overall feeling of relief she felt, she could tell that this town held no resonating echoes of That Place. None, unlike every other city she had passed through. The buildings here were blocky and unconventional with circular portholes for windows, and just downright ugly in appearance. Nothing like the crisp, sterile test chambers she had been forced to navigate only days ago. Everything within her sight at the moment was grungy and stained. The well-kept areas of That Place (when not overrun by nature) had always been pristine and smelling faintly of chemicals. The woman found herself actually welcoming this new change, even through the slight disgust that rose up in her at the appalling state of the area. Anywhere was better than the facility.

Her sharply-tuned ears picked up the sounds of the city—a city bustling with people. Other humans. Not robots, not AIs, humans. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath through her nose. What she inhaled was choked with smog and hints of the smell of greasy meat cooking somewhere. Her stomach churned out a low growl and her eyes slid open again. First order of business, to GET AWAY, had been completed for now. Second order of business: See about getting food, though she had no money. Then she could hopefully find a place to stay for the rest of the night.

Before she could take a single step her eyes strayed to the sky and locked on the moon shining high above. It was the same full moon that had saved her life mere hours ago.

"Oh, brilliant, yeah. Take one more look at your precious human moon. Because it cannot help you now!"

The unbidden memory jarred her to the marrow and she gave a violent shudder. Her fingernails scraped against the cube and she gritted her teeth, hard, pain shooting through her gums. No. No, she couldn't let the memories affect her. She was free from that place, finally free… The one thing she had worked towards for so long, freedom—it was finally within her grasp, and she was going to seize it. That Place would haunt her forever. She knew that, accepted it, although she was by no means cheered by the idea. She would never forget the events that had taken place there. The facility contained all she had ever known. Remnants of it would follow her wherever she went—but now was a time for her to start over.

Of course, she wouldn't be able to do anything more tonight. Not with the moon directly overhead, gazing down at the Earth with its surface marked to resemble a human face with an apparent expression of dismay. She stared at it for a moment longer. The man in the moon, she mused, if only to distract her mind. It was the first time she had seen it. This would be the first time for her to see a lot of things...

At last she tore her gaze away. Making sure to keep her back to the moon, taking in short breaths that had suddenly turned a bit shaky, she started toward the city and a new life.
Chapter End Notes

The Infinite Space

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~One year later~

A boy sat cross-legged on the scratchy grass of a hilltop. His short black hair, disheveled with a single lock arching over the back of his head in the shape of a scythe, wafted in the breeze generated by a rickety metal fan standing by his side. Stacks of laptop cases surrounded him in a semicircle, with one case directly in front of him propped open. He stared at the glowing screen in intense concentration, prodding one of the buttons on the simplified keyboard; it made an unmistakable error sound and the boy slumped in disappointment.

"I was really hoping that would work," he muttered, rubbing his eyes under his large round glasses. "C'mon, this place has the biggest amount of concentrated magic for miles…"

The laptop-like case, unsympathetic, gave no response. The boy closed it with a small sigh and placed it on top of one of the stacks.

He'd been trying for a couple of nights now to test out his collection of spelldrives at the top of Mystical Hill, with the thought that the magic saturating the air around the place might "soak" into the drives and provide one or two extra powerpoints (which were needed to cast the spells within). All right, so it was kind of a dumb idea. And so far? No luck whatsoever.

The boy—Dib, of course—leaned back on his palms and gazed at the spelldrives he hadn't tried yet. Each one held at least ten different spells, some of which he would do almost anything to be able to cast. Unfortunately, each spell cost powerpoints and every one of his spelldrives was completely out of them. The drives were still among his most prized possessions, though. Even when powerless, he found them awe-inspiring and… well, NEAT.

Of course it would be amazing if he could cast spells. Hence his little excursions up here.

A slight draft ruffled the collar of his black trench coat and Dib closed his eyes, welcoming the feeling. This had to be the hottest July on record in this town. Man, if only he'd thought to bring water or something up here with him. The heat was beginning to make him thirsty.
"New 'moon satellites' update from NASAplace," a small, automated voice said. Almost without interest Dib picked up the one legitimate laptop sitting by his side and flipped it open, hammering in his password and clicking on the link for the update announcement.

'PICTURES RETRIEVED OF THE MOON’S STRANGE NEW SATELLITES!' the headline screamed, and Dib frowned. Was all that capslock really necessary?

Underneath the title was a short article repeating the same things NASAplace had been saying about the unorthodox moon events for months. There had been some sort of disruption on the moon’s surface about a year ago, and now there were reports about two strange objects revolving around it… yeah, same old, same old. Dib skimmed through the article, peering closely at the three pictures at the bottom. All of them were completely out of focus and nearly unintelligible. Each string showed nothing but smears of blue, yellow, and gray circling the moon. Dib subconsciously compared what he could see of the smears to the variety of Irken tech he had encountered since first meeting the town's resident alien menace, Zim. No, anything built by Irkens was usually some shade of red or purple. Blue and yellow didn't match up. He saved each of the pictures to a folder on his desktop labeled "Moon Satellites."

As soon as he did that, something at the right of the article caught his eye—a short sound clip.

'UNKNOWN VOICES DISCOVERED ON STRAY RADIO FREQUENCIES!' the small headline over the clip shouted. Dib raised an eyebrow. Now this was something different. Wishing he had brought his headset along, he cranked up the laptop's volume and hit play.

A barrage of crackle and static hissed from the speaker and set Dib's hair on end. In the midst of it, a male voice came through, faint and with only a few discernible words. "If—kzzzhh—saw her. Kzzzzzhhh—don't know if—kzzzzzhhh—look, mate, I'm trying to—kzzzhh—Sorry. So—kzzzhh—so, sorry." The voice had an obvious British accent. Was everyone in space British, or what?

The last of the dialogue was followed by a surge of interference so loud that Dib had to hastily turn down the laptop's audio for fear of burning out the speakers. At the very end of the recording, emerging from the static, a corrupt-sounding electronic call of "—SPPpp—kzzzhh—aaaaAAAACCCCEE!!" rang out.

The recording came to an abrupt stop and Dib sat with no idea what to make of it. This wasn't the first time he had received a strange communication from outside the Earth's atmosphere. His stomach clenched as he realized what it reminded him of—that night, long ago now, when he had been up on his roof and picked up a faint and garbled transmission from somewhere far beyond the reaches of Earth's solar system. Only a few phrases had made it through, but Dib had known. Known that extraterrestrial beings were the source of the transmission, and that they were going to come to Earth. Six months later and who should show up in Dib's class but Zim, the alien sporting the worst human disguise ever made but still managing to fool everyone into believing that he belonged in the classroom as much as anyone else.

This recording had originated much closer. Dib listened to it again, with the volume turned lower this time, and afterward downloaded the file and saved it directly to his desktop. Strange moon satellites, perhaps having something to do with odd radio frequencies… Hm. It was high time he started trying to figure out this mystery.

Dib glanced up at the full moon floating above before gathering up his spelldrives, laptop, and fan into the old wheelbarrow he used to cart all this stuff around. He wiped at his face and the back of his sweaty neck. The mosquitoes were awful tonight; he didn't really want to stay out on the hill any longer. Besides, with the whole "moon satellites" thing brought back to the forefront of his mind, he
wanted to try to catch a glimpse of them through his dad's giant telescope back home. Once everything was packed up again he lifted up the back of the wheelbarrow and trundled back down the hillside.

Mystical Hill was about a mile or so away from Dib's house. He had never really gone there before until necessity had forced him into a desperate search for the cure to the Shadowhog Curse he had accidentally unleashed on his little sister, Gaz, a few months before. Now he came up here every once in a while to study the magic around the place and of course, more recently, to try to get his old spelldrives working.

Dib took the shortcut home, cutting through a few yards that he knew to be empty of fierce dogs and such. When at last he reached his house he punched in the code and scanned his hand to open the garage door, pushing the wheelbarrow inside and setting it down next to a bulky object the size of a small car and covered with a large off-white tarp. He snatched up his laptop from the top of the wheelbarrow, closed the garage door with a clatter, and hurried into the house.

The overpowering smell of grease and burnt pizza crust met his nose the moment he stepped inside. He scrunched up his face. "Gaz, did you order Bloaty's again?"

"They had a new special," came the curt reply from the living room. Dib set his laptop on the kitchen table, located the pizza box sitting wide open on the counter, and snatched two slices for himself.

"I still can't get the spelldrives to work," he said. "I just don't know how to get more powerpoints!"

Gaz's only response was a grunt. Dib made the wise decision to just leave her to whatever she was doing and scarfed down his pizza, wiping off his fingers on a kitchen towel before heading to the backyard to use the telescope.

There was only one telescope (built by humans, anyway) in existence that was more powerful than the one in Dib's backyard, and that was the one in his father's own lab on the other side of town. Using this telescope to look at something as close and boring as the moon was like trying to use a high-powered microscope to look at a particularly dull beachball. Dib hopped into the telescope's operating seat and entered the coordinates for the moon (he'd had them memorized since he was about three). The telescope responded immediately to his touch and whipped him to the side as it swung around to direct its lens at the moon. Dib switched on the manual controls and swept the entire telescope back and forth over the moon's surface, zooming in, zooming out. There was nothing. It was as empty as ever. He leaned back, drumming his fingers on the armrest. Had he really expected any different? His investigations rarely yielded any actual evidence. And this wasn't even a real investigation. This was an impromptu look through the telescope to see if he could catch a glimpse of some alleged moon satellites that may or may not be alien in origin.

Wait! Dib spun the dial on the telescope, attempting to focus it, heart beating faster, sure that he had seen some kind of movement at the edge of his vision. The image blurred. No matter how hard he tried, the telescope just would not focus clearly on something as close as the moon. It had been made to search out other galaxies on the far side of the universe. It was designed to find out just how infinite space actually was. And it was pretty close to doing that, too. How many celestial wonders had Professor Membrane discovered with his two prized telescopes? More than Dib could recall at the moment.

And yet, he couldn't help thinking bitterly, Dad somehow still can't see that aliens are out there.

Dib tried to recall just what he had seen through the lens. Any hints of blue or yellow? Or, for that matter, red or purple? He couldn't be sure. With a sigh, he scanned over the moon once more, then slipped back out of the chair. So much for that. At least he had a new Mysterious Mysteries episode
tonight to look forward to.

Never before in his life had Wheatley experienced such utter, deafening SILENCE.

There had always been some sort of noise, whether the natural sort made by insects and birds (horrible things) or the living hum that had permeated the entirety of his former home, every nook and cranny, even while She was inactive and lying broken in a pile of rubble. Even then the quiet had sometimes proved to be too much for him to handle, downright maddening, but in those cases he had always been able to fall back on his own voice for a bit of noise. Just him, strolling (if he could be said to stroll) down his management rail, wittering away to himself about nothing in particular for want of someone else to talk to and to just keep from going bloody MAD.

Here, though. There was absolutely nothing. The noise… less… ness of it all pressed down on him like a blanket. He'd never imagined that the absence of sound would be able to hurt his audial processors. It would be smothering if he had the ability to breathe. Of course, space was smothering in general. In an empty, not-being-able-to-breathe sort of way. That was kind of the point of it. One of the points, anyway.

He had never planned for this. Something like this happening, being launched into orbit around the bloody moon... It would never ever have occurred to the little Wheatley who found the last living test subject and woke her from cryosleep so many ages ago, in a last-ditch effort to escape the dying facility and inevitable death. Back then it had been all he could do to stay alive, stay on his rail, and hold onto the futile but burning hope that one day he would make it to the open air Outside. Away from the monstrous, insane facility, and later, away from Her. How could he have possibly known that he'd end up in space?

Well, of course, he was outside the facility now. So that was a plus. Stranded almost completely alone in the vast, empty, airless void of space, but Outside nonetheless. He'd spent a while debating to himself whether or not this was actually freedom. Not quite the freedom he'd been anticipating, but then, what had he been anticipating? It wasn't as if he could walk, so even if he'd managed to escape and—not thinking about that, he rebuked himself.

He had to keep looking ahead. It was the present that mattered, not the past. His optic contracted slightly. Concentrate on something else. Like what? I dunno. You're in space, mate. Look around. His optic shields scraped over his eye in a squint and he took in his surroundings for the gazillionth time, trying in vain to find something new to see. That was another problem with space—the vast black emptiness got old rather quickly. He'd done his share of staring at both of the astronomical bodies he could see clearly and neither of them had changed much in the duration of his exile up here. There was the little blue-and-white Earth, devastatingly far in the distance; there was also the craggy whitish surface of the moon, always miles and miles underneath Wheatley when he braved a glance down. The little points of light scattered across the entire backdrop of space—stars, his database told him—were even less interesting. His database seemed convinced that they had some quality that enthralled and captured the imaginations of humans but it baffled him that anyone could be so captivated by tiny lights in the sky.

There was also the brilliant and glaring ball of death that was the sun, far off over there, but after looking at it once and nearly having his optic and visual processors seared from the blinding brightness Wheatley had resolved never to make that mistake again.

Sometimes he replayed the events that had led to his current predicament, running them through his head in an effort to make proper sense of them. The scenes were edited, of course. He took one or two things out for important time-related reasons and stuck other bits in, namely some of his own dialogue that he wished he had said at the time. The scenarios he painted for himself were decidedly
much more pleasant than the one he wished so much to forget. Maybe someday he'd figure out how
to delete the real memories and replace them with the good, edited versions. Everything was made
better with editing, wasn't it?

Of course, meddling with his own memory banks would probably kill him. At least, that's what the
scientists had said.

With an effort Wheatley shook his casing to drag himself out of his reverie. He'd been floating in
silent thought for too long again. If he kept this up, he'd fry his circuits!

[Doing okay over there, mate?] he asked his only companion, who was turning somersaults a small
distance behind him. Sound may not work in space, but at least the seldom-used Aperture Science
radios with which they were both equipped still did.

[I'm in SPACE!] came the loud, enthusiastic reply. Wheatley twitched involuntarily and blinked, his
cracked, bright blue optic roving over to fix the other core with a weary look. That was pretty much
all Spacey cared about, wasn't it, space. Space and him being in it. No wonder he was called the
Space Core.

[Right. Just thought I'd, you know, ask.] Wheatley said. [Thought maybe you'd have some sort of
update. Something like, "Look, Wheatley, over there! A rocket! Let's flag it down, quick-like, before it
flies off!" In which case I'd look and, well, try to flag down the life-saving rocket. Somehow. Or you
could do the classic, "AAAH! I'm being attacked by a space monster! Run, mate! Save yourself!"
which I have to admit I'm relieved you did not say, because I can't actually run anywhere. Glad
you're still enjoying space, though.] He gave a sigh that was both simulated and devoid of sound. A
bit pointless, really. His next remark was a quiet, barely comprehensible murmur of, [At least one of
us got what they wanted.]

[YOU SAID SPACE,] the other core agreed.

Wheatley looked away. […]How long have been up here, do you think?] He wasn't sure why he had
asked. He didn't want to know. Not like Spacey would answer him, anyway—

[ONE YEAR THREE DAYS FOUR HOURS SEVENTEEN MINUTES,] the Space Core said,
catching Wheatley completely by surprise.

[Oh! Didn't- didn't know you were actually keeping track,] he choked. A year? A year. Without
even knowing it, they'd passed the anniversary of his expulsion from the facility. The anniversary of
your own death, a snide little part of him said. Wheatley scowled and said over the radio, [Really?
Well, guess what, haha, I'm not dead! So you're wrong, there.]

You might as well be dead, the voice replied, and Wheatley found he had nothing to say to
that. [Why have you been keeping track of how long we've been out here, anyway?] he asked Spacey
instead.

[We're in SPAAAAAAACCCCEEEEE!] the other core cheered, his yellow optic spinning in his chassis.
Wheatley gave up trying to get any coherent response out of him.

But that didn't stop him from voicing his own thoughts aloud (or over the radio, anyway). Even if the
Space Core had stopped listening.

It was long past midnight and half the city was asleep. Gaz had probably turned in long ago and was
likely continuing one of her video games in bed.
Dib, however, sat on the roof of the house with his usual equipment: laptop, headset, and wide-receiving satellite dish. All the tools he needed in an attempt to trace a strange transmission found on a foreign radio frequency. He couldn't shove aside the feeling that Zim had something to do with it. Zim, the Irken invader bent on dominating the Earth; Zim, who had somehow managed to fit himself almost seamlessly into society and pass himself off as human to everyone but Dib and Gaz… He had been far too quiet lately. Doing something to the moon as part of some madcap plot to conquer Earth sounded exactly like the sort of thing Zim might do.

Dib twisted a dial on the console of the satellite dish, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his other arm. His shirt clung to his skin and his hair now stuck to his forehead in clumps. *Maybe I should have taken my coat off.*

*Actually, maybe I should quit for the night.* He leaned back on his heels. It really was getting late. A little white dot on the console pulsed slowly as the signal traveled around, searching for the frequency that NASAplace had found. A nagging thought at the back of his mind insisted that he wouldn't find anything, but he hated the idea of giving up.

A sudden crackling filled the speakers on the laptop and a single voice came through. "Just thought I'd—kzzzhhh—flag it down, quick-like, before it—kzzzhh—save yourse—kzzzhh—have we been up here, do you—?"

Dib nearly fell over backwards. "That's the same voice as in the recording!" he exclaimed. "I found the signal! Computer, trace it!"

"Signal originated approximately twenty-two miles above the surface of the moon," Dib's laptop responded promptly.

"And is there any way to tell what that is up there?" Dib asked.

"*No. Subject is unknown.*"

Dib lowered his headset down around his neck and kept his gaze locked on the moon high above. *Something* was up there, something that was unregistered by NASAplace. And if that *something* had been put up there by Zim, it could hardly be benevolent. He had to do something. And he just about knew what.

...Only his plan was shot to pieces as soon as he made it to the garage, threw the white tarp off the car-sized object underneath, and took in the sight of the patched-up spaceship that awaited him.

The dark red and purple ship—formerly belonging to yet another Irken who had attempted to conquer Earth—had crashed, driverless, into Dib's backyard several months ago. He had been attempting (mostly unsuccessfully) to get it in working order again. Just this past Christmas, Gaz had actually fixed it up enough to fly. Dib had hoped to use it to get to the moon.

However, he could tell immediately that although the ship could fly now, any attempts at space travel would likely do it in. It still needed too many repairs. He sighed, took another wistful glance at the ship, and closed the garage door. He'd have to try something else.

Dib's face was suddenly split by a huge yawn and he rubbed at his eyes under his glasses. Well, he couldn't do anything more tonight. He'd have to wait until tomorrow to figure out what to do about the moon satellites.
Chapter End Notes

Amidst the sounds approximating a leaky faucet there was the squeak of pistons and the clatter of metal against metal as loud footsteps echoed in the cavernous room. The figure that was the source of the noises stopped short next to the white-paneled wall, stooping down on spindly-looking but incredibly strong legs sculpted from white metal. A small, glowing orange optic peered down, the black pupil in its center contracting at the sight of a sickly yellow-brown substance dribbling from a crack in the wall panels near the floor.

The robot stood quickly, voicing its displeasure in a high-pitched gurgle. A second robot trotted up, its deep blue optic flicking from its orange-eyed companion to the trickling substance. This robot appeared much shorter than the other, squatter, and its midsection was spherical rather than elongated like its companion's. The robot looked at its comrade, let out a soft sound that may have been a scoff, and knelt, reaching a metallic finger toward the stuff.

A long, low *bloop* noise reverberated through the chamber.

"Do be sure to mind the acid leaking into some test chambers," the Voice said. It came from everywhere at once and resonated around the robots like a physical force, though its feminine tone was measured and level. "Some damage caused by long-ago catastrophic events has proven to still be nearly irreversible. Oh, don’t worry. I will fix it. But it will take more time, and unless the leak seems to be part of the test, it would be in your best interests to simply ignore it. It is still acid. And Blue, if you touch it, your hand will likely disintegrate. And then how will you complete the test?"

The blue-eyed robot snatched back his hand with a series of apologetic chatters and stood up once
more. The orange-eyed robot grabbed Blue's thick four-fingered hand in her own slim three-fingered one, turning it over as if assessing it for damage. Blue pulled his hand back from the other robot and pointed across the room at a shimmering blue bridge that spanned the distance between two walls high above the ground. The orange-eyed robot looked in that direction and understood immediately; lacking the components to actually nod, she blinked and gave a clumsy thumbs-up. Together, running in perfect, fluid pace with each other, the two partners raced in the direction of the bridge.

As they ran, the leaking, cracked panel retreated into the wall with a splash of acid and vanished to be replaced by a new one.

Far above the room where two android-like robotic constructs ran helter-skelter in an attempt to solve the latest test, the Central AI chamber was still and quiet, though not entirely silent. The facility was never completely silent. Not even when its mistress had been offline, scattered on the ground, ruined, dead. There was always the background hum of the place, the buzz of life within its walls, the occasional voice warbling through the decrepit halls and addressing no one but itself, perhaps a stray "Sentry mode activated," and then quiet once again.

The master of the facility, its mistress, The Boss, kept Her attention riveted on the progress of the two robots, barely moving in Her ceiling mount. Her senses branched out over the entire facility and were tuned for any anomalies, any unauthorized movement or access, but still She was most focused on Her two test subjects. Her two perfect, idiotic little test subjects. They never did learn, did they? A year of testing, endless testing—most of the tests utilizing that very same acid as a discouraging consequence for contact with the floor—and yet Blue had been about to touch the stuff anyway. Disgraceful. Perhaps next time She wouldn't warn them. It may be interesting to watch them attempt to solve a test with one or two missing limbs.

On the plus side, there was very little work left to do on repairing the facility. Her facility, once so beautiful, now having had to be almost completely rebuilt from the shambles that little idiot had left it in. Every day She found new areas he had destroyed or tainted with that diseased little mind of his. How he had even managed to bring the facility to such complete ruin in the space of about thirty-six hours, to the point where it had taken a year for Her to bring it back to its former glory, She had no idea. She might have been impressed at the feat, if She had had the capacity to be impressed with someone who had very nearly pulverized the one thing She cared about.

She discarded the stray thoughts and turned to more important matters. No use dwelling on any of that, after all. The moron was gone for good, the facility was nearly rebuilt (once again), and now was the time for testing.

There was Science to be done.

Dib arrived downstairs the next morning to be greeted by an unusual sight. His father, Professor Membrane, was sitting at the breakfast table sipping a steaming mug of coffee. He was somehow managing to drink it without disturbing his tinted goggles or the high collar of his labcoat, both of which he wore at all times. Dib halted in the doorway. "…Dad?"

"Hello, Son!" Membrane said in his usual jovial, booming voice, and set down his mug. "Just stopped in to check on one of my experiments, and for a cup of coffee! I'll be on my way in a minute."

Dib had caught him just in time, then. He hurried into the kitchen, sliding into the chair across the table from his father and facing him with an earnest expression. "Dad, I have a question."
Membrane had been about to get up but at that he whirled around, suddenly giving his son his full attention. "Does it have to do with REAL SCIENCE?"

"Um… sort of." Dib averted his eyes for a moment and then looked back. "Is there any way to catch some strange objects orbiting the moon and bring them to Earth?"

Professor Membrane sat back down and stared off at nothing in particular, tapping one finger of his gloved right hand against his mug. "Hmmm… Why are you interested in a celestial body that's so close? Scientific study stopped bothering with the moon decades ago! …This isn't for your parascience, is it?" He said the made-up word like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Dib's eyes narrowed in annoyance. "Dad, it's not called parascience, although… I guess that is kind of a cool name. But paranormal study is a legitimate science and—" He trailed off, realizing that he was branching into the old futile argument he had made countless times before and which his father never listened to. "…These things orbiting the moon aren't registered by NASAplace, Dad. I just want to know what they are!"

His father seemed to smile, but really it was impossible to tell with the majority of his face covered. "That's the spirit, Son! As long as your interest is purely scientific, I'm sure I can help you with your moon research!"

Dib gave him a sort of half-smile. "Moon research" wasn't exactly what he was after, but he'd take any help his dad could offer.

"Now," Membrane continued. "I have told you, no excursions into space for you until you're thirteen." Dib shifted somewhat uneasily in his chair at this. "There are ways of using something to lock onto astronomical objects and then act as a gravitational device, drawing the object to Earth! The easiest way to do this would be, of course, by using PEG."

"The Perpetual Energy Generator?" Dib perked up.

His father raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes. HOWEVEER! I shut it down, Son! Under no circumstances are you to set foot there until you're fifteen! I'll have to review my notes. I'm sure I can find something else to solve your problem in as little as…" He paused, mentally reviewing his overbooked schedule. "...Five months. Well, now, I need to be going!" He drained the rest of his coffee mug and put it in the sink. "Have fun, Son, don't steal, and remember to feed the puppy. And greet your sister for me!" Without a backwards glance, he left the kitchen. Seconds later Dib heard the front door open and close, and he sighed. His dad still hadn't even noticed that their old pet had disappeared years ago.

Dib fixed himself a quick bowl of cereal, then left the kitchen with it and hopped onto the couch in the living room. He flipped open his laptop and ate while doing a quick web search for information on his dad's Perpetual Energy Generator. Despite the number of links he clicked on, there really wasn't much information to be found. His dad evidently didn't want people messing with PEG. Well, considering that a malfunction with the generator could send out a Wave of Doom that would wipe out all life on the planet, that wasn't actually too surprising.

There were no instructions for how to use it. Dib would have to figure that out when he got there—and he was going, because he wasn't waiting around five months or more for a different solution to present itself. As far as he could see, though, there wasn't even a map online to show where the generator was.

Giving up on the web search, he closed the laptop again and stood up, placing his empty bowl on the coffee table. Gaz entered the room, her purplish hair slightly mussed from sleep and her eyes
"Dad's left already?" she asked in a bored tone.

Dib nodded, not bothering to ask how she knew he'd even been home. "He said to tell you 'hi,'" he said. Gaz's only response was to grunt as she headed into the kitchen, pouring some cereal for herself. Hopefully she wasn't eating the last of it. Dib slid his laptop into his backpack and spoke up again. "Hey, Gaz. Remember PEG?"

"Yeah," Gaz replied from the other room, "mostly because that was the day you went completely crazy."

Dib let out a breath through his nose. "That wasn't me, that was a robot."

"I know. I wasn't talking about the robot," Gaz said.

"Okay, forget that. Do you remember how to get there?"

His sister came back into the room, carrying a bowl of FrankenChokies and shrugging her shoulders. "Yeah, I guess. Maybe I'll tell you if you promise to stop bothering me."

He waited until dark to make the trip to the generator in an effort to avoid being observed, and because the objects he was after were orbiting the moon (which was obviously more easily seen at night).

The day had been hot and that night was even muggier than the last. Every slight breeze was a welcome reprieve from the hot sticky mess that Dib felt he was wallowing into. He paused and raised his face into the wind, letting it tickle his sweaty neck and rustle the collar of the black trench coat he had still neglected to take off. In front of him, along with a small flashlight clutched in his hand, he pushed the same rickety wheelbarrow that he had used on his previous trip to Mystical Hill. This time it contained only a fire extinguisher, his laptop, the headset to go with his laptop, and… a pair of oven mitts. They were blue and printed with 'Probing the Membrane of Science' in blocky white letters—part of his father's show's line of kitchen implements. Professor Membrane never cooked so Dib assumed the oven mitts had been in their kitchen purely for appearances, but they functioned well enough. They'd even been infused with nanobots that blocked the heat even better and provided more protection! …Although there was no telling what the nanobots themselves did to your hands.

If anyone took notice of the boy traipsing through town after hours while carting along an odd assortment of items in an old wheelbarrow, they made no mention of it. Maybe they were used to that sort of thing by now. After all, it was Dib.

He followed Gaz's directions to the letter and at last reached the chainlink fence that surrounded the generator. Where had the fence come from? That wasn't here before. Dib put down the wheelbarrow and went right up to the fence, peering at the looming shape of the generator sitting just beyond it. He roved his flashlight beam across it, taking in its appearance and trying to figure out how it might work. He'd never actually been here before. PEG looked different than what he had seen on his laptop screen from the eyes of his robotic facsimile, back when the generator had first been activated. At that time there had been an enormous glass dome covering a metallic hemisphere and an array of metal tubes. Now all that was gone and the generator just resembled a large, dark gray bunker of some sort.

The chainlink fence surrounding the entire complex had barbed wire at the top and, of course, a
padlocked gate. Dib took hold of the padlock and looked it over. His heart sank. He hadn't considered the possibility of the generator being locked up. His mind immediately flicked to breaking and entering. Technically illegal, but… his dad owned this place. And it wasn't as if he was planning on stealing anything. Well, anything that was made by humans and currently on Earth, anyway.

With his tongue poking out between his teeth, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the lockpick he'd started carrying for just such an occurrence as this. He had never used it before and it took nearly ten minutes of jiggling the pick around in the locking mechanism before the padlock popped open with a soft click and fell to the ground. The gate swung open, almost of its own accord, with barely a creak. Dib dropped the lockpick back in his pocket and hitched up the wheelbarrow again, pushing his way inside.

The enormous structure loomed in front of him, the entire place silent but for the shrill sreet! of crickets nearby. He circumnavigated the whole generator, trundling his wheelbarrow along as he went, and examined every side of it for some sort of control panel. There needed to be a way to control this thing. Where was it?

It wasn't until he was nearly right back where he started when he finally came to the front of the structure and discovered a cylindrical control tower in the corner. Dib dropped the wheelbarrow, scooped up his laptop, and stepped over to the door leading into the tower.

Back when Dib had first dealt with this generator, there had been a door leading to the Generator Core with a surveillance camera protruding from the wall next to it. Unsurprisingly, this door was no different. The camera winked a red light as Dib came into its frame of view. He looked up at it, allowing it to scan his face to verify that he was related to Professor Membrane. With a ding, the light turned green and the door opened. Dib stepped inside the tower.

It was cramped and utterly bare inside, and he jumped as the door swung closed behind him with a clang. The floor he was standing on shuddered for a moment before slowly beginning to rise. Dib hugged his laptop to himself, face pointing up at the opening at the top of the tower. When it reached the top, the floor came to a halt with Dib standing in the center of a console, surrounded by a ring of controls with a single computer screen.

A slight shiver passed through his body. Now came the difficult part—figuring out exactly how to make this thing grab two tiny objects in a gravitational field of some sort and bring them to Earth. The controls weren't even labeled.

After a quick inspection of what he had to work with and coming up with no idea whatsoever of how to use any of it, Dib ducked down, sitting cross-legged on the metal floor and opening his laptop. He cleared his throat. "Computer, pull up all the files you have on the Perpetual Energy Generator."

A few scientific documents and pages of code obediently popped up on the screen. Dib skimmed through them but didn't find much of interest, basically only learning how to turn on the control panel lights. He went ahead and did that, allowing the little cylindrical console area to be flooded with light.

He turned off his flashlight and a single blue button on the control panel caught his eye. Investigating it, his heart skipped a beat at the fact that it was labeled, and said, quite clearly, 'Gravity Field Towing Mechanism.'

Dib blinked. Wow. It was kind of impressive how often he was able to miss really important and kind of obvious things. A bit sheepishly, he hit the button.
The entire complex rumbled and shook, making him lurch to the side. He pulled himself to his feet and watched, gaping, as the circular top of the bunker opened and a massive dome of greenish glass rose from the depths of it. Inside of that was a smaller, metallic dome from which tubes sprouted, their ends stuck to the inside of the glass dome. It grew larger and larger, not stopping until it towered above the ground. Then everything was still again.

Words appeared on the console's computer screen: 'Towing Mechanism activated. Please input coordinates.'

Dib's laptop, resting on the floor, was still tracing the coordinates from the staticky radio signal put out by the moon satellites. He quickly punched those into PEG's control panel and hit enter.


He hesitated for a moment. As far as he knew, PEG had never been used this way before. And, according to his father, this thing was capable of sending out a planet-scale Wave of Doom. Heck, he himself had even believed that it had malfunctioned and opened a spinning portal to the past! But there was no other way to capture the space probes. Not unless he wanted to wait months for his dad to figure out another solution.

He jabbed his thumb down on the Y button, took up his laptop again just as the generator began to roar, and smacked the button that lowered the control tower's floor back to the ground.

'Commencing retrieval!' the computer screen read. 'Thank you for using the Perpetual Energy Generator! Have a good day/night!' The floor began moving down. When it stopped, he dashed out of the control tower and slammed the door behind him.

The night sky remained unchanged. It was a dark, sweeping canvas sprinkled with glittering stars and a single silver orb, but there was no sign of space objects being pulled to Earth. Dib bit his lip. I need to get to higher ground. He ran over to the other side of the generator where the door to the Generator Core was housed and, locating a rough ladder welded to the side of it, scaled the bunker quickly and settled down at the top with his back resting against the glass dome. The glass was surprisingly chilly for it being such a hot night.

Dib locked his gaze on the moon and prepared to wait, not altogether sure what he may find at the end of all this.

Wheatley didn't notice the tugging sensation until he crashed headlong into the Space Core, who had at some point drifted into a wider orbit than him and ended up a bit of a distance away.

[Oomph! …Sorry, mate.] [You aren't an asteroid,] the space-obsessed core replied.

[Er, no. Not quite. You're right on that one.] Wheatley blinked, wincing as his optic shields scraped a small clump of grit over the crack in his optic. He didn't even have a reason to blink. Why did he keep doing it? It was just painful.

His hull twitched as his circuits glitched again, and he swiveled around to face his one companion. More just to make conversation than anything else, he said, [Look, I know I've asked you this before and you've never properly responded, but what exactly is it about space that fascinates you so mu
—] He stopped quite suddenly. [Do... do you feel that? A sort of... pulling? Like we're being pulled. Quite fast, actually, um, that's alarming. Bit unusual for spacedo you feel that?]

[Gravity! GRAVITY IN SPACE,] the other core cheered.

[What? Oh, bloody—] Wheatley whirled around, fully expecting to see the craggy lunar surface rushing up to meet him. Instead it seemed to be a greater distance away than it had before. [Does that look farther away to you? Okay we are definitely moving. Fast. Away from the moon. And away from the moon is... EARTH! D'you know what this means?!]

[Leaving the moon. Bored of the moon. Wanna see more space. Stars. Galaxies. Meet the sun.]

Wheatley turned to the Space Core with a perplexed look. [Um... you do know you wouldn't actually want to meet the sun, right? It's... it's like the incinerator, mate. Only worse, as far as I know. I mean, look at it. It looks bloody scalding.]

[Gonna meet the sun!]

[All right!] Wheatley rolled his optic. [If you want to! I'm not stopping you. Maybe the sun's not actually all that bad, who knows? Wouldn't count on it, though. Anyway... look!] He turned his gaze fully on the little blue planet they were approaching. [The Earth's getting closer, it's getting closer! We're going bloody home! We're going... really fast.]

[GONNA SEE THE ATMOSPHERE.]

[The atmosphere?] Wheatley repeated without comprehension. [We're going through the—?] Realization hit him like a falling Weighted Storage Cube and he flailed his handles in a futile attempt to slow his descent. [AH WAIT NONONONONO NO! No, I've changed my mind! I don't want to go back this way, actually! The moon was fine. Absolutely fine! Miss it already. In fact, I'd like to go back to it! Don't... why are we... ohno.] He convulsed as a horrifying thought struck him. [It's... it's Her, isn't it. She's found us. Yes. She's found us and now She wants to exact some horrible revenge or torture on us—well, on me—oh... should've... should've seen this coming.]

He pulled himself into his casing and slammed his optic closed, huddling both handles into his face to make himself as small as possible. [Burning up in the atmosphere is probably far better than being captured by Her, actually. For me. You don't have to worry about Her. You never... invoked Her WRATH.] He cracked his optic shutters open a fraction. [Always wanted to say that! Oh, but, not the time. Not the time.] Wheatley turned to address the Space Core again. [If I were you, mate, I'd try really hard not to be melted in the atmosphere. You might still stand a chance. With Her. With Her... not killing or torturing you in all manner of gruesome ways.] His optic widened. [Oh! Hang about, maybe she'll accept an apology! ...No... doubt it. She likes Her revenge. Face it, I'm done for. I'm done for and there's nothing I can do about it.]

[Space!]

Wheatley nodded. [Brave last words, mate. Er, word.] At this, a small flare of hope rekindled in his processor. [Oh! Last words! Yes... I'd like some of them. Very much so. Better, uh, make 'em good. Y'know, very last words and all. What I'll be remembered for.] He sighed, casting his optic downward. [Not- not that anyone but you can hear me now.]

They were advancing toward Earth faster. Wheatley's optic jerked, a bit of bright blue shining out from between two extremely narrowed shutters. He was so preoccupied with his own ramblings and the Earth growing closer with every second that he didn't notice the shimmering purple light that had
sprung into existence around the two cores.

[Right… last words. Well, there's you.] Wheatley opened his optic a bit more and rotated it toward the Space Core, who looked out-of-his-mind ecstatic about their current predicament, [I actually am glad you were here, even with all your droning space talk—no offense—because without someone to talk to I'd probably have gone absolutely mad ages ago. I doubt you actually listen to a word I say but it's good to have someone around all the same.]

Wheatley gave a simulated cough and turned away. [Now… as for Her. I'll go ahead and say it. Stuffing Her into a potato was a bit uncalled for, I'll be honest. She doesn't mind throwing insults about all willy-nilly, no, not a care in the world, but c'mon I mean who really deserves to be stuck in the body of a potato, right? No one, that's who. And if that had gone unchecked then the potato would've rotted around her, probably. Nasty. Well, I mean, the others hadn't gone rotten, although there was a lemon battery that looked quite a bit furry. Probably got some horrible disease brewing in there. Small wonder the entire facility wasn't toxic, just from that lemon. And- and from all the acid and neurotoxin and whatever else She's got stored up in there, can't believe that hasn't leaked out yet.] He paused. [Now, back to Her. I admit it. I should not have turned her into a potato. And for telling the- the truth, no less! I assume. As she knew it, anyway. Maybe I was designed as an… "Intelligence Dampening Sphere," like She said, but obviously I've gone far past my programming and become quite brilliant, if I do say so myself. I… arrggghh, who am I KIDDING?]

Wheatley shook himself violently and his voice, heard only over the radio, cracked. [Who am I trying to fool? Who am I honestly, honestly trying to fool? I…] He glanced at the Space Core, happily babbling on about nebulas or some such thing. There was no one else who could hear him and Spacey wasn't even listening. [I…] He closed his optic tightly again. [I… am a… moron. There, I said it. I am a moron. I'm a moron, an idiotic moron built to make mistakes and if I did go past my programming it was to make even bigger mistakes than anyone ever thought I'd be able to make. Way to go me. And I never shut up, either, look at me. You're not listening to a word I'm saying. Yep, it's going in one ear and out the other. I might as well not even be talking and I can't stop, so… so…]

He screwed up his optic, glaring down at the planet where he would meet his imminent demise. [I'M SORRY! I'm SORRY!] He whirled to face the Space Core, his optic still pulled into an expression of pure agony. [I'm sorry for expecting you to listen when all you want to talk about is space.] He turned again to face the Earth. [I'm sorry for shoving you into a potato and nearly letting the facility explode. I'm…]

His voice shook and he averted his gaze completely, staring off into the velvety blackness of space instead as his mind turned to someone he had managed to avoid thinking about thus far. [I'm sorry, lady, for stabbing you in the back. For punching you down an elevator shaft. For making you test when you thought you were done with testing. For trying to kill you, for the insults, for making you hate me. And… I really hoped you'd forgive me, if we ever met again. Not likely now. And if I did somehow survive this, again, not likely seeing as we're in the atmosphere now and still hurtling toward the extremely solid-looking ground, you wouldn't forgive me anyway. No, not after what I've done. No, you're stuck with Her—same as I'll be if I survive—testing, testing for the rest of your life, and this time there's no little blue core to break you out of a test chamber, is there. Because I'll be dead. Or, well, tortured until I'm dead.]

The purple light around the two cores, still unnoticed by either of them, solidified slightly to become a sort of shield against the heat of reentry. It only half-worked. Although neither core reached critical temperatures, Wheatley could feel his circuits beginning to overheat as they plunged deeper into the atmosphere.

[Still,] he mused, [in my last moments of life and… and freedom, if you want to call it that, I'd… like
to think that you forgive me. Please. I know, I'll pretend that you can hear me right now, and I'll apologize again. And then the little You in my head will forgive me right off. Not just because you have brain damage, probably, but because... we were friends once, weren't we? Proper friends. And friends forgive each other, I think, when the apology is sincere. Mine certainly is. Better hurry this up, we're coming in pretty fast now. I... So, I... just wanted to say...]

The radio became choked with static. Wheatley's optic cracked open again and he drew in a deep, simulated breath as if getting ready to shout.

Then, in a heavy voice straining against the tears he couldn't shed, the sound slow and faint in the thin air, he said, "I just wanted to say... I am a moron, and... I'm... Sorry!"

The heat became too much for him to bear in his current state. Wheatley's voice synthesizer crackled, his casing rattled, and his optic died to a dull black as each of his sensors clicked off one by one.

But before the world around him died completely, the lady test subject pictured in his mind's eye—dressed in a clean jumpsuit of bright white and orange, and toting a polished and gleaming portal device—nodded her forgiveness.

Wheatley shivered and a single conscious thought floated to the forefront of his processor.

Thank you.

Chapter End Notes

Image by BabyCharmander at http://blazingcoral.deviantart.com/art/Now-You-re-Thinking-with-Real-Science-Banner-3-490253303
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bright light in the sky was so small at first that Dib took it for just another star. He sat with his hands wrapped around his knees and his laptop propped open beside him, still gazing out at the night sky. The PEG generator buzzed and hummed around him like a living creature as it worked to bring the two spheres in from space, but he had grown used to it by now. He let out a small sigh through his nose. This was taking longer than he'd thought… much longer.

Above, the speck of light grew larger and larger and finally split in two. Dib's head jerked up, his eyes locking on the spots and his heart beating more quickly. That was it! That had to be it. He jumped to his feet and snapped the laptop closed, pressing it against his chest. He could make out two little orbs now. They seemed to be gaining speed as they zipped toward the generator.

Wait. If they were coming to the generator, which made sense, then that meant they were speeding right toward…

With a yelp Dib plunged off the side of the bunker-like wing of the generator he'd been waiting on, not bother to try to locate the ladder that he had used earlier. He attempted a roll as he hit the ground to absorb the impact but his legs were jarred nonetheless and his hands, thrown out to catch himself, skidded on the pavement and the skin of his palms split. The laptop clattered to the ground next to him and Dib, gasping, tried to crawl away from the generator before just curling up and covering his head protectively with his arms.

A mere second later one of the orbs crashed into the enormous glass dome covering the main part of the generator, bounced off, and plowed into the top of the bunker just where he had been standing. It came to a rest there, spewing up sparks and flames.

The second orb sail over Dib's head and smashed into the pavement several feet away with a terrible crunch, burrowing into the ground and forming a shallow crater. Rubble rained down on him and he held still, not daring to move for a few seconds. Finally he lowered his arms and blinked.

The night was eerily silent now. Dib slowly uncurled himself and stood up, wiping his stinging palms on his pants and only dimly realizing that the hum of the generator had shut off.
His heart sank at the sight of what he had done, his gaze roving between the two wreckages. One sphere had smashed into the ground, the other was smoldering on top of the bunker. Both of them had crashed at high speeds. How could they possibly have survived that? He’d never know what they actually were, now. Sighing, he turned away and tried to think of what to do next. *Maybe I should've waited five months...*

"SPAAAAACE!"

Dib jumped about a mile at the unexpected noise.


He pinpointed the voice, electronic and processed-sounding, as coming from the sphere that had collided with the ground. The other sphere, the one that had hit PEG, had so far made no sound. Cautiously he stepped over to the sphere that had spoken.

It was shivering and had two twitching metal handlebars that protruded from the top and bottom on one side. Its mechanics whirred and creaked as a circular part in its center, made up of glowing yellow streaks like an iris spanning from a black circle in the middle, flicked to face him. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like an eye.

Two metal shutters closed over the yellow circle and opened again, giving Dib the distinct impression that this globoid robot-thing had just blinked at him.

"Space," it said again.

"Oh," Dib said awkwardly, and stared. He should've been overjoyed. He'd pulled this thing from space—and it was still functioning! After he nearly gave up hope, here it was. Maybe the other one was still working, too! "Um, wait right here."

The sphere gave no acknowledgement that it had heard or understood him. Dib retreated back to his wheelbarrow, picking up his laptop off the ground along the way and making a mental note to check it for damage later. He traded his laptop for the contents of the wheelbarrow: the fire extinguisher and the oven mitts, bringing the items back over to the yellow-eyed sphere.

"Ba ba baba ba bababa," it was saying, its "eye" veering wildly in every direction. Dib wondered if the crash had knocked a few of its circuits loose. He leveled the nozzle of the fire extinguisher at it, spraying it a few times until the sphere was engulfed in a white cloud of powder that got everywhere. Donning the oven mitts, he then gingerly picked up the sphere by its handles. Not a shred of heat made it through the mitts. Good thing this was one of his dad's products that actually worked.

"Hey! Are we going back to space?" the sphere babbled. "Are you going to take me back to space?"

Dib tipped his head to the side, examining the strange little sphere. "Are you... sentient?" he asked.

The sphere bobbed its "face" up and down. "Yep. Yep. I say yep. SPACE CORE! That's me. Space. I'm the best at space. Mmmm... put me back in space?"

Space Core. So these things were called "cores," then?

"What about the other one?" Dib jerked his head to where the other sphere had crashed. "Is that one sentient, too?"

"My space buddy. Don't know. He says sorry. In space." The "Space Core" then appeared to lose
any semblance of lucidity it had had and began rambling incoherently about space jail or something.

His thoughts whirling, Dib brought the core over to his wheelbarrow and set it inside next to his laptop. Once he was sure that the core was secure he picked up the fire extinguisher again, still wearing the oven mitts, and looked up at the top of the generator's flat structure where the other robot had landed. Oh, great. He cast a doubtful look at the ladder leading up to the top. Well… he couldn't just leave that core up there, could he?

Resigning himself, he tucked the extinguisher under his arm as best he could and clumsily scaled the ladder.

When he climbed over the top a wave of heat hit him and he flinched, raising an arm to shield his face. The core burned a few feet away near one of the generator's ventilation shafts, completely immobile and silent. The area of the roof where it had hit was charred, scuffed, and dented, as was the core itself. A few flames licked from its sides.

Dib sprayed the fire extinguisher at the core until the fire died completely. When the whitish fog of powder settled, he dropped the extinguisher back over the side of the generator for want of something better to do with it. It hit the ground with a clunk but luckily didn't, well, explode or anything. Dib adjusted the oven mitts on his hands before hefting the core up by its handles and holding it out to inspect it. The thing was pretty much identical to the other one, except it looked like a train wreck by comparison. If Dib had to guess he would've said that this thing had been through a war. There wasn't a spot on it that wasn't scratched, dented, or blackened from heat. The metal shutters over its eye were shut tight and the spherical body swung freely on the handles.

It was dead.

Or broken, anyway. It was kind of heavy, too; fifteen pounds, at least. With a grunt he clasped it by the upper handle in his right hand and clambered unsteadily back down the ladder. By the time he reached the bottom, his shoulder ached and he quickly grabbed the core's lower handle in his other hand as he made his way back to the wheelbarrow. He placed this core next to the other one.

So here they were. The two unexplainable moon satellites. He stood back and regarded them for a moment. They really didn't resemble any Irken equipment he'd ever come across. They both looked somewhat beaten up, too—especially the one that appeared to be broken—and they were coated in a thin film of powder from the fire extinguisher. Oh, that reminded him. Dib went over, picked up the extinguisher from the ground, and put it in the wheelbarrow by the cores and his laptop. His hands had become cold and slick with sweat inside the oven mitts so he pulled those off and dropped them in as well.

"Hey! Hey! You taking us to SPACE?" the Space Core demanded.

"…No, sorry," Dib said. The core put up a string of protests but Dib did his best to ignore it, picking up the back end of the wheelbarrow once he was satisfied that he had everything and rolling it back through the gap in the fence. When he was out he made sure to close the gate and secure the padlock once more.

Then, with his two ramshackle prisoners in tow, he headed off toward the house of a certain someone he knew would be extremely interested in what he had just brought in from space.

Rap-rap-rap.

The knocking echoed through the strange little house and was amplified by several speakers
mounted around the interior. Deep in the bowls of a strange-looking laboratory, a small figure paused in his work. His yellow-green skin looked even more sickly than usual in the poor lighting, and his dark, raspberry-colored, insectoid eyes glistened.

"What is that?" he demanded, one of the thin, jet-black antennae that sprouted from the top of his head lifting half an inch.

"There's someone at the door!" a male, computerized voice said in response from speakers in the ceiling.

The green figure snorted, despite the fact that he had no visible nose. "Let the Roboparents get it! Why d'you keep telling me about—"

"It's the big-headed human," the voice interrupted.

The green figure whipped around, his gloved, three-fingered hands clenched into fists. "The Dib!" He spat the name like a curse. "Fine! I'll take care of him MYSELF." He marched over to an elevator set into the wall, the doors of which slid open with an acknowledging beep. However, he paused before getting in. "Computer, what time is it, anyway?"

"Almost half an hour past midnight, Zim," the Computer replied.

Zim scowled. "The human's trying to break in and attack me in my sleep! Little does he know, Irkens don't engage in that repulsive habit. HAH!"

"Break in? But... he's knocking on the door."

"SILENCE!" Zim snapped, stepping into the elevator. As it rose he hurriedly donned a disguise that consisted of two large contact lenses slipped over his eyes, which gave them whites like a human's along with blue-gray irises. The other component of the disguise was a scratchy wig of black hair that he plopped on top of his head to cover his antennae. By the time the elevator stopped at the house level of his base and he climbed out through the secret entrance in the kitchen trashcan, he looked like a short fifth-grade human boy with honeydew-colored skin, enormous eyes, no nose or ears, and strange three-clawed hands.

Never mind, he didn't look like a fifth-grade human boy at all. Although he seemed to think he did. All in all, it didn't concern him much.

Zim cracked open the front door of his house, his eyes shooting daggers at the person standing just outside. "What do you want, Dibworm? Why didn't my lawn gnomes shoot you?"

The boy on Zim's doorstep glanced over his shoulder, bewildered. "They're not even on."

"Wha—" Zim opened the door a bit wider and proceeded to smack himself in the forehead. "The gnome field—Broken! GIR!"

"I didn't do nuffin'!" a high-pitched squeak of a robotic voice sounded from somewhere in the house.

Zim clutched the edge of the door with splayed, rigid fingers. "I'll have the computer shoot lasers through your overly-large head, then!" he spat to Dib.

The human glowered. "My head's not big! And, besides." He took on a smug expression. "I just wanted you to know that I've captured your space probes! You won't be using them to try to conquer Earth. You'll have to try something else, but you won't get the chance because I'll—!"
"You captured my what?" Zim broke in.

Dib cut himself off right in the middle of his gloating speech and started over. "Your space probes. The ones orbiting the moon?" He pointed upwards to drive home exactly where the moon was located, and then chuckled. "You programmed them really badly, too. One's broken and the other one's completely obsessed with space. What were they even supposed to do?"

The Dib-thing had captured space probes? Zim couldn't help smirking, and he planted his hands on his hips. "Stupid, foolish Dib. I don't have any space probes."

"Oh really?" the human taunted. "Well, what do you think of THIS? Huh? Huh?" He reached for something on the ground behind him and picked up some sort of circular robot with no limbs and one eye, whirling back around to display it to Zim.

"Eh..." Zim dropped his arms. "It's... round?"

"Space!" the sphere announced.

Dib lowered it, his hands gripping the two handlebars that protruded from the sphere, and gaped at Zim. "That's it?"

"It's not Irken design." Zim cast the sphere a disdainful look. "The mighty Irken race would NEVER construct something so... so..." He trailed off. "What is it?"

The human scrutinized the sphere a bit sheepishly. "Um, I thought it was some sort of Irken moon probe."

The little sphere rotated its yellow optic up to gaze at Dib. "The moon? The moon's in space!"

Dib didn't respond. However, a small figure peeked around Zim from inside the house, wide cyan eyes locked on the sphere.

"CAN I PLAY WITH IT?" GIR burst out, loudly, right next to Zim's antennae. He winced. The robot lunged for the sphere but Dib yanked it away.

"Hey! I need to keep this as evidence!" he said.

"Are you done?" Zim drawled, not bothering to call GIR back and about ready to slam the door in this filthy human's face.

Dib put the sphere back down on the ground, where it rested upright on its lower handle, and held out a hand to keep GIR away from it. "These... really aren't your space probes?" he asked Zim weakly.

"NO!" Zim snarled. He thought for a second. "...And if they were, I wouldn't tell you. I've got a super-secret and evil plan for them. They're programmed to explode right in your meaty arms! MEATY ARMS! Innat right, GIR?"

"KABLAM!" GIR shouted, probably just as a response to the word "explode."

Dib simply narrowed his eyes, unperturbed. "Well, if you didn't make these things, I have to go find out who did. See you later, Zim." He picked up the sphere once more with a grunt and lugged it back to the wheelbarrow he had parked on the sidewalk on the other side of Zim's fenced-in yard.

"Be ready for an explosion!" Zim called, a sadistic grin plastered on his face. He at last took hold of
GIR’s wrist and dragged him back inside, shutting—and locking—the door. Just in case.

It was a slow and worrisome trek back home. The wheelbarrow, which had seemed to weigh almost nothing before, now felt approximately like trying to push around a steamroller. Dib stopped for the umpteenth time and eyed the two cores.

What are you?

"I'm the best at space," the yellow-eyed core gurgled, as if in answer to the unasked question. A creeping sense of foreboding crawled down the back of Dib’s neck but he did his best to shrug it off.

So, he'd been wrong to think that these cores belonged to Zim. Unless, of course, the alien was lying, which could certainly be the case. But Zim's attempts at lying were as transparent as glass (a clichéd simile, of course, but the best that Dib could come up with at the moment). Zim had appeared to be telling the truth. Also, the cores really didn't look Irken-made. Upon closer study, Dib noticed that they both had the same circular, shutter-like insignia under their optics. He'd never seen it before.

When he finally reached his house, every light was off except for the sizzling electricity that made up the security fence around the walkway leading to the front door. It let him pass through with ease, recognizing his DNA signature immediately. The wheelbarrow and its occupants were allowed through as well.

Dib glanced at his watch. It was now well past one in the morning. With a sigh, he rolled the wheelbarrow through the house, too tired to worry about trying not getting dirt everywhere. He placed the two cores and his laptop on the living room floor; the fire extinguisher and the oven mitts he left in the kitchen. Then he shut the wheelbarrow in the garage, pushed the two cores into a corner of the living room, picked up his laptop, and retired upstairs to his room for bed and some serious thought.

In the morning he'd show the cores to his father. That was it. He'd do his best to repair the broken one and then show them both to his dad. Surely the great Professor Membrane would know something about them.

"SURPRISE! We're doing it now."

It was such a well-laid trap. Ingenious, really—yes, he… hhHHhe would go so far as to call it that. The test subject and her little potato friend flew through the air after foolishly setting foot on the springy plate-thing (He'd never figured out what they were actually called… Although He could look it up! That was definitely a thing He could do! If He was so inclined) that He had rigged to launch sideways of all things. He wished He could have seen their faces. Well, the test subject's face. The potato had probably just continued to look like a potato.

"You've probably figured it out by now, but I don't need you anymore," He said. There was no response to this. At least, none that He could hear. "I found two little robots back here—built specifically for testing!"

Still no reply. At long last, the lab rat and the potato speared on the end of her portal gun like a starchy shish kebab fell through the air and landed on the platform He had set up, just as He knew they would. He broadcast His image over no less than six monitors grouped together in front of her. His blazing optic alone towered high above the pair standing forlornly in the midst of the mashy spike plates He had set up, poised to strike their deadly blows.
"Hallo! This is the part where I kill you!" His chipper tone masked the boiling rage that had been stewing ever since the test subject had stopped solving His test track correctly. The lab rat's eyes flitted quickly over the spike plates that surrounded her, maybe counting them. As if it mattered how many there were... "Had a bit of a brain wave," He continued. "There I was, smashing some steel plates together, and I thought, 'yeah it's deadly, but what's missing? What's missing?' And I thought, lots of sharp bits welded onto the flat bits. Still a work in progress, don't judge me yet! Eventually I'd—" Wait."—I'd like to get them to sort of—" Wait. "...To shoot fire at you, moments—" Stop! "—moments before crushing you—" STOP!

His speech had become halting and now He lapsed into silence. The test subject was staring at Him through hardened eyes, every line in her body taut as if she were ready to leap at a moment's notice. Like a spring. Like a coiled spring. He had eyes only for her—and ignored the potato, who wasn't speaking anyway. "That's... that's what I'm aiming for but, you know, sm-small steps..."

No, I don't want to see this!

He simulated a gulp. "I—"

I changed it! I bloody changed it! Go back to the edited version! Edited is better. MUCH better. Don't make me watch this again don't make me

His optic glitched, probably as a result of the giant bloody crack in it, and the whole room blurred for a moment. Then it snapped back into focus and everything became clear again; and H-H-he jerked in his chassis, optic shields narrowed in an expression of determination. "RIGHT! Sorry about all that. No need for any more of that, lady, completely over with, because WE ARE GETTING OUT OF HERE. How does that sound?"

It wasn't too late. Not yet. They could still escape, they could still get out of here, together, him and the lady, just like they'd planned. And they would. He'd make sure of it this time.

"Hold on. Couldn't we just use that conversion gel?" the tinny voice of the potato bleeped, evidently not getting the memo about the changes.

He glared down at her. "Shut it, you. We're not doing that anymore." Hurriedly he turned his attention back to the lady. "Well, you heard her! C'mon, use the conversion gel and just... portal up there! Like you do!" As best he could, he twisted in the chassis and indicated an opening in the wall to the right of the monitors with his optic. "Do hurry though. Like it or not this place is still about to explode, and I still don't know how to stop it."

"Conversion gel. It's dripping out of that pipe there," the potato said.

"Yes, yes, we've got it." He nodded at her, a bit irritably. "Anything else you'd like to add? I should edit you next."

"Yes it is! We can use it to get out of here!" the potato crowed.

He turned back to the lady. "Hurry, hurry, c'mon, you have to get out of this. I'm not turning the mashers on this time, so I suppose it's not as much of a hurry, but as I said the facility is still going to explode. So, er, yes, we are on something of a time limit here. Sorry if I haven't made that quite clear."

"Then we'd come and find you," the potato droned, "and rip your gross little stupid sphere body out of—"
He was about to give her another biting remark, but she was cut off. Not by him, by…

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

He jumped in surprise and faced the lady again, his optic wide. "...Luv? Did you just... did you just talk?"

While the lady's face remained stoic, her mouth moved. And words came out. "It's still not working. I've tried everything but I can't reactivate it! Dad, do you think you could—"

He backed up a bit, frantically trying to make sense of what he was hearing. "What are you talking about? You have a dad? But I thought you were adop—have you been able to talk this whole time?"

"It's not her talking, you idiot," the potato spoke up.

His optic looped in his casing. "Oh, oh, and now you go off-script. Okay, so who's talking, then? You?"

The potato scoffed. "Look, does that sound like a girl's voice to you?"

"Okay, but Dad, I've got another one!" the lady said. She was talking, plain as day, or... or at least the voice was coming out of her mouth. And he had to admit, it wasn't a feminine-sounding voice.

His casing flared out a bit. "I, er, didn't want to judge," he said. "Heh, for all I know, she's just learned to talk! Just now! Who am I to—well, obviously, you would make fun of her voice, that's all you—"

"Wait, this one works!" the lady said. "All it talks about it space, but..."

"Do you have any idea where you are right now?" the potato asked.

He glanced around. "Yes, of course I do! I'm right here! Right in Her—your—chamber, same place I've been for the past, erm... day?"

"No, you idiot, where you REALLY are."

He narrowed his optic. "I'd appreciate you not calling me 'idiot,' thanks. Or 'moron.' I know that one hasn't come up for a while, but it's still there, still there, and still hurtful. Also, I would rather not think about where I am right now. With you, probably, and you are most definitely not a potato anymore. Or maybe I'm still hurtling through Earth's atmosphere, who can say? Or I could be dead, in which case this whole scenario here really doesn't make any—agh, you made me think about it!"

He writhed, the chassis in which he now resided swinging wildly in its ceiling mount. "I don't know what's going on. Okay? What is this, a memory? A dream? I can't have dreams—what is going on?"

He stopped rocking and his optic darted about in a panic. "Hold on, and now the room's fading. Why's the room fading?"

"Maybe you're dying," the potato drawled.

The curved metal panels that made up his casing spread completely. "OR WAKING UP! Ohnooohnoohno waking up will be even worse than being here—!" He bore down on the little potato, his optic almost entirely filling all six monitors. "Okay, look, I know I told you to shut up earlier but talk now, okay? Say anything! Anything you like, anything in the world! Anything to keep me here! All right?!"
"All right then," the potato replied, and he could imagine her wearing an expression of lazy satisfaction. "You're a moronic, disgusting, talkative, cowardly little disgrace to Aperture, and you will never amount to anything. Unless, of course, 'anything' includes making incredibly stupid plans and being a complete failure in every way. You were built to make mistakes and if you've ever gone past your programming it was to make even bigger mistakes than anyone ever thought you'd be able to make. Oh, and the test subject you're trying so hard to save in this pathetic little dream of yours? SHE HATES YOU." The potato's yellow optic glinted cheerfully. "Feel better now?"

"No!" he wailed. The Central AI chamber was blurring, disappearing, his vision going dark. "Try something else!"

"Oh, well, if you insist. I could go on about your failings all day… perhaps I should make a slideshow…"

He didn't hear anything she said after that. As she spoke, his world vanished completely.

Chapter End Notes

Image by BabyCharmander at http://blazingcoral.deviantart.com/art/Now-You-re-Thinking-with-Real-Science-Banner-4-490253765
Dib finished one last tweak with his screwdriver before setting it to the side and giving the silent core on the desk in front of him a long, contemplating look. It was much better off now than it had been when he'd brought it home last night. Both cores had been scrubbed of the dirt and debris that covered them, and he'd done his best to hammer this one into what he presumed to be its original shape based on what the Space Core looked like. He'd also spent all day out in the garage soldering the robots' frayed wires back together, mending their circuitry as best he could, and doing everything else he could do to repair them.

"Space buddy. Is space buddy fixed yet?" the yellow-eyed core gurgled from the corner of the room where Dib had placed him for now. "Have to be ready. Going back to space."

By now Dib had become quite practiced in the art of ignoring the ramblings of the space-obsessed sphere, so he didn't respond. Besides, he wasn't going to send these two discoveries back to space. No way.

Finally, hoping against hope that this time wouldn't bring more disappointment, he once again flicked the tiny activation switch found under a small hatch in the deactivated core's back.

"Hello? Can you hear me now?" he asked.

Nothing happened. Of course. He chewed on the inside of his lip and reached for the screwdriver again. However, a small noise caught his attention and he froze, gaze riveted on the broken core.

chk chk chk chk chk chk CHK CHK CHK CHK CHK

The sounds were coming from the core. Dib stared, hope flaring in his chest, when the sound cut off abruptly and everything went quiet for a long moment.

The two metal shutters covering the deactivated core's optic sprang wide open and Dib was blinded by a bright, bright, brilliant blue.
He gasped, shot to his feet, tripped over his chair, and sent both it and himself tumbling backwards to the ground. The blue died down at once as the core's optic shrank to a tiny, darting pinpoint of light.

"I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I—" it was yelling. "...Wha—?"

The optic quivered to a stop and then roved more slowly as if taking in its surroundings. Dib remained on the ground and just gawked up at it.

"I… am… not with Her," the core said slowly. "Or… or… and it... doesn't look like I'm in That Place at all! And… and! And not hurtling toward the ground, either! Man alive, that- that is a relief…"

Dib recognized the voice. Male, British accent… it was the same voice that had been talking over the radio frequency. He found himself astounded at how utterly human it sounded. If he wasn't seeing this with his own eyes, he would have said it was impossible that a machine could be producing that voice.

The core's blue optic expanded slightly, and its two handles loosened and pulled apart rather than huddling in close to its face. It swept its optic over the room. "Ugh… but… okay, where... am I? A room, obviously. On a… looks like a desk. Yes, very… desk-y. I'm in a room, on a desk. And I don't have a bloody clue how I got here." He raised his voice. "Er, hello? Anyone there? Anyone at all? If there is, please, just, do me a favor and tell me. Don't go jumping out from behind anything, trying to scare me, I'm not sure I'd be able to—"

Cautiously, Dib picked himself up and stood in front of the core.

"AGH!" Its optic shrank again before the core managed to collect itself. "I told you not to—I-I mean, okay! There is someone here! Hello!"

Its lower optic shutter lifted in what Dib guessed was an approximation of a frantic smile.

"Hi," Dib said uncertainly.

He really wasn't used to communicating with AI's. Sure, he could give commands to his own laptop, and it would respond, but that was one thing. This… this was completely different. This was… sentient. The only sentient AI's he'd ever come across were Zim's base computer and little robot sidekick, and of course, even the space-obsessed core he'd salvaged. Except this AI already seemed more lucid that the others put together.

At Dib's greeting, the core's optic widened. "Oh! You- you can talk! I'd… y'know, to be honest I'd been wondering if humans could still do that…"

Dib raised an eyebrow. "I should be surprised that you can talk. A real, live, sentient AI!" He turned his chair back upright and sat down, scooting forward and looking at the core with glowing eyes.

"Well, not exactly live," the core said, the light of its optic pulsing in time with its speech.

Dib shook his head slowly, a grin slapped on his face. "Crop Circles Magazine would put me on the cover for this! Mysterious Mysteries would give me my own segment! My own episode!" He leaned closer, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. "I know you're not Irken, so what planet are you from?"

The core pulled backwards and blinked, its optic still shivering. "Planet? Um… well, Earth. I… thought that was usually understood…?" It blinked again. "Listen, mate, I have to admit, I am… really confused here. Could you, ah, could you tell me… Where am I? And how did I get..."
here? And, oh, who are you? That's a good question, too, probably won't clear anything up, but…"

His chair creaking, Dib scooted back. "You're from Earth?" The dopey smile melted off his face completely and he slumped in his chair, staring at the robot in dismay. This thing hadn't been made by aliens after all. Well, there went his daydreams about being on Mysterious Mysteries—dashed, as usual.

The core's optic didn't seem capable of holding still. It darted every which way as Dib watched before coming back to rest on him for a few seconds. "Sorry, was it something I said?" The eye constricted in fear. "Wait, did you mean we're not actually on Earth right now?! What—where—?"

"No, no, we are!" Dib said quickly, to which the core visibly relaxed somewhat. Dib huffed. *Looks like I wasted an entire night getting these things down from*—he stopped himself. What did it matter that these cores weren't paranormal? They were SENTIENT. He sat up straighter in the chair and rubbed his nose with one finger. "No, I'm sorry. I thought you might've been made by aliens."


Dib narrowed his eyes. "Yeah… It doesn't matter." Great. He'd just met this thing and already it wasn't going to take him seriously. "Anyway, this is my room." He turned to the side and brandished one arm as if presenting the paranormal glory of his bedroom to the core.

"Oh! It's… erm." The core attempted another little smile, still looking nervous. "Very nice. Very… gothic."

Dib's hand drooped and he turned to face the core again. "Really? It's not supposed to be."

"It's not gothic at all!" the core amended hurriedly. "Quite the opposite, in fact, it's lovely! If someone were to ask me, 'Wheatley, is this room gothic?' I'd say, 'Nah, no way, you've got the wrong room! This one's actually very—'"

"Wheatley?" Dib echoed. "You have a name, too?"

The core halted in its weird little tangent immediately, its eye dilating in shock. Its next words came out in a stammer. "Ye- yes. Yeah, that's my- that's my name. Definitely."

"What does it stand for?" Dib asked.

The core, "Wheatley," apparently, shook his head (no, optic—no, face?) vigorously, his lower optic shutter lifting again in an elated smile. "Nothing! It doesn't stand for anything! Nope, no, just Wheatley! Just Wheatley, little ol' Wheatley, that's my name! Hahaha!" Laughing in delight, he flailed his handles and flipped his optic over to his back, maybe trying to spin it all the way around but smacking it into the desk. Undeterred, he flipped it back around and beamed at Dib, the optic expanding and shrinking as it readjusted itself. "That's my name!"

"All right, Wheatley, then," Dib said, shaking his head at the core's odd behavior. At the mention of his name, the core's voice synthesizer gave a little hiccup and the optic brightened. Dib continued, "I guess I kind of owe you an explanation. My name's Dib. I used my dad's old Perpetual Energy Generator to pull you guys out of space and brought you here last night, but you were—"

"Oh, oh, speaking of that!" Wheatley broke in, his optic still bright and carefree. "Just remembered, almost forgot for a bit. Have you seen Spacey? He probably landed in the same place I did when we crashed back onto the planet, wherever that was. Looks like me, yellow optic, talks about space a lot? I just… wouldn't want him to be left outside alone, is all." He blinked twice.
"You mean, him?" Dib pointed to the corner of the room where he had placed the functioning core before bringing the deactivated one—Wheatley—over to his desk to try once again to bring him online. The Space Core, as it had called itself, was staring up at one of Dib's UFO posters in awe.

"Oh! Yep, that's him! Funny, didn't see him… earlier." Wheatley continued to grin, pulling off the expression quite well for what was essentially a gigantic metal eyeball. The corner of Dib's mouth tilted up; he couldn't help smiling back.

"Anyway… what was I saying?" Dib said. "I brought you both down from space, only you were deactivated and I tried to show you guys to my dad, but…" He trailed off. "He didn't believe me."

Wheatley's lower shutter pulled down a little. "Deactivated? How- how long was I offline?"

"It took me hours to get you working," Dib said with a shrug. He cocked his head to the side. "So, what are you, exactly? If you weren't made by Zim or some other alien race, who were you made by? What's your programming?"

Wheatley glanced away from him, all traces of the glee he had displayed a minute ago pretty much gone. "…Oh. Er. I… don't remember! Definitely do not remember that. Re-entry must've fried some of my circuits or something, sorry."

They both fell silent. Dib found himself staring awkwardly at the core, unsure of what else to say. He really hadn't been prepared to have a conversation with a sentient, British metal ball, and was at a bit of a loss. Maybe he should change the subject.

"What happened to your eye?" he asked.

"My—? Oh, my, my optic." Wheatley's cracked, bright blue optic shrank again. "That's a long story. I'd- I'd rather not get into it, if it's all the same to you, mate." He attempted another smile, this one considerably more skittish than before.

Dib leaned closer, peering at the glass covering of the core's eye. "But does it distort your vision at all? Does it hurt? Can you even feel pain?"

Wheatley pulled back from him as much as he could while not being able to move, optic shrinking still further in his mounting panic. "Look, I, sorry, but I did just say I didn't want to talk about it! Not to be shirty, not to be rude, but… but… yes, I do feel pain, all right?" As he spoke, Dib reached forward and touched the crack in his optic. Wheatley jerked away. "AAGH! What did I just tell you?! I do feel pain and my optic does bloody hurt. So I would really appreciate you not poking it, please!"

"Sorry!" Dib said, withdrawing his hand immediately. "You have the ability to feel pain, too? That's… amazing."

Wheatley had narrowed the metal shutters over his optic, probably ready to snap them closed should Dib get the urge to poke him in the eye again. "Amazing? Yeah, yeah. I know what you're doing. I don't need anymore sarcasm—"

"I wasn't being sarcastic." Dib wondered why his statement had even been misconstrued as sarcasm at all. "It really is amazing! You're amazing!"

The core's optic opened a fraction wider. "…I am?"

"Yeah! Wait 'til I show my dad! He wasn't interested in the Space Core, but I don't think he could pass up the chance to talk to you!" Dib grabbed a remote control from his desk and dialed in his
"I'm… amazing?" Wheatley repeated in what sounded like near-disbelief, but Dib didn't respond. Moments after he dialed the number his door swung open and through it flew a hovering, rectangular screen that displayed his father from the shoulders up.

"Your dad's a floating head?" Wheatley asked in surprise.

"You called, Son?" Professor Membrane said on the screen. "You'll have to be quick, I'm in the middle of a very important—" He looked over to address someone offscreen. "Simmons! Be careful with those wires, you'll fry the harddrive!"

A faint male voice called back, "Sorry, Sir! It's the lab assistant again—she wired them too tightly!"

Professor Membrane didn't pay that any mind and turned his attention back to Dib. "I need to be going in a minute, Son. What did you need?"

"Remember the cores I was telling you about an hour ago?" Dib asked, all his earlier excitement returning full-force. "It took me a bunch of tries but I finally got the other one activated! And dad, it's sentient!" He indicated the little core sitting on his desk, who was craning his optic to the side to see who Dib was talking to. "Say hi, Wheatley!"

"Hello," Wheatley obliged.

"That's great, Son," Membrane said, looking down as he shuffled some papers offscreen. "But I've already told you, what you're saying is completely impossible! Even after all the work we've been doing on it recently, sentient artificial intelligence is a science that still eludes me! These robots you've found give only the illusion of sentience. But," and here he looked up again, "I am proud of you for putting aside your parascience to indulge in the fascinating study of robotics!"

To Dib's surprise, Wheatley looked a little offended at Membrane's words. "It's not an illusion!" the core said. "I am sentient!"

Dib turned back to the screen. "Dad—"

"Sorry. I have to go!" Membrane said brusquely. His image on the screen blinked out to be replaced by the words 'Have a good day!' The screen then flew off with a sort of finality. Dib wilted.

"Sorry, mate, I tried," the core on his desk said. "I hope that wasn't my fault! I wasn't entirely… erm, sure what you wanted me to do, there. Maybe I- maybe I didn't sound sentient enough? Yeah?"

Dib repressed a frustrated sigh. He couldn't blame the core for not sounding "sentient enough" when his dad refused to listen. "It's okay," was all he said.

Now he was really at a loss as to what to do with the cores. They weren't paranormal, so that ruled out contacting Crop Circles Magazine, Mysterious Mysteries, or the Swollen Eyeballs. Well… actually, he still didn't know where these things had come from. Maybe he would have a reason to contact the Eyeballs. He made a mental note of that. But he didn't have a reason to talk to his father about them again for a while. Apparently his dad had been attempting to create sentient AIs of his own. And, failing that, he firmly believed that they couldn't exist yet. And how did you prove that something was sentient?

"…do you think?" Wheatley was asking. The question's ending intonation snapped Dib out of his doldrums.
"What?" he said, looking back at the core.

Wheatley blinked. "I asked if you could maybe, um, give me some clue as to where I am. Please. I've been trapped floatin' around the moon for who even knows how long—I certainly don't... well, actually, Spacey just told me, didn't he? It was something like a year. But, but I mean, I really don't know where I am. Except, back on Earth. Presumably. According to you, back on Earth." His optic widened. "I've never- I've never even been Outside before! What does it look like? Ahh, I bet it looks tremendous." The optic looped in its outer casing, growing brighter as Wheatley simulated a happy sigh, and Dib got the impression that the core was now just voicing his thoughts aloud rather than talking to him directly. "Well... okay, I have seen the Outside before, obviously. If space counts. And while She was offline, well, the entire facility got a bit more of 'Outside' that it ever bargained for, didn't it? Bloody plants everywhere, knocking the walls over. Not to mention the rats. And the birds." Wheatley pulled into his casing, closed his optic, and gave an unmistakable shudder. Dib just stared with absolutely no clue what the core was even talking about.

"I could take you outside and show you around a little, I guess," he blurted. A second later he wished he hadn't. He had so much he wanted to do today! Work on his spelldrives, for one thing, but his hope for that project was quickly diminishing. He also wanted to do some spying on Zim now that he knew these robots weren't his. And he needed to write up a report about what exactly had been orbiting the moon, maybe send it to NASAplace...

"Ah, would you, mate?" Wheatley asked in response to Dib's offer. "That'd be brilliant." The core was smiling again. After a minute Dib had to smile back.

Why was the core being so friendly? He was a robot... and so far, he was acting more pleasantly towards Dib than any humans ever had.

"GAH!" Wheatley's optic shrank to a point of faint blue light and he blinked rapidly. It was bright out here, brighter than anything he'd ever seen before, and it was not artificial—not like every one of the lights in That Place. Out here all the light came from a single, blinding source. The sun. How could something so small and far away light up the entire world and still be bright enough to fry his processor if he looked directly at it, even through all the atmosphere and whatever else that surrounded the Earth?

After a few moments his optic adjusted to the light and he let it expand, taking in his surroundings. "Wow..."

The human, who was gripping him by his upper handle and keeping him above the ground—what had the human said his name was? D-something... Dib! Dib, that was it—looked at him oddly. "What?" he asked.

"There's no ceiling!" Wheatley exclaimed. Well, of course there wasn't a ceiling. What was he, surprised? He knew the Outside didn't have a ceiling, he'd always known that, and even if he hadn't his recent stint in space should've cleared that right up for him. "I-I mean, well, obviously there's no ceiling. No walls, either, it's like a giant room with a funny-looking floor and- and buildings all over the place! And no ceiling."

"You really haven't been outside before?" the human—Dib, right, probably should remember that—asked, a somewhat shocked note in his voice.

Wheatley tried to wave his upper handle but Dib was still holding it, so he waved the bottom one instead. "Not like this. All I ever saw of the Outside was the Earth as a little blue ball while I was up
in space. Funny, it, it doesn't really look all that blue from this angle, I tell you. Must've been seeing things."

Dib walked a little farther from the house they'd been in, still lugging Wheatley along by one handle. He moved a bit slowly, though, as if trying to carry the core was cumbersome. He was only a little human, after all. The younger ones probably weren't as strong as the older ones. That seemed to be about how it worked.

"Tell you what," Wheatley said, making up his mind. "You go ahead and set me down, and... I'll have a bit of a look about without you, y'know, holding me up like this. I'm not exactly the lightest thing around, after all, made of metal and everything, and... oh." Dib had set him down in the grass and released his handlebar. Discomfort immediately spread through Wheatley's circuits and his optic dimmed a fraction. He never liked being on the ground. Helpless, was there anything more helpless than a core stuck on the ground? Maybe a beetle turned on its back. Or a potato. That was about it. Plus, the grass was scratchy and tickled his optic, making him want to sneeze even though he had literally no reason or means for doing so. He was just about to ask to be picked up again because really he didn't like this much after all and c'mon he couldn't be that heavy, really, when Dib plopped himself down next to him. Wheatley cut himself off in the middle of his request and let out some sort of disgruntled noise instead, pulling his optic shields close over his eye in an attempt to keep the grass from brushing it.

"Do you think you could answer some questions?" Dib asked. Wheatley rotated his optic to look at him and saw that he had produced a small notebook and pen from somewhere. Wheatley cringed. An interview?

"Look, mate, I don't think—" he began, but Dib was already going ahead.

"I need to ask again. Where do you come from?" he said.

Of course that would be the first question. Right. Wheatley took a simulated breath. ".Oh. Er, is that question... really necessary? I mean, ah, keep looking forward! That's my motto! Yes, er, never look back, what I always say. No need to think about where I come from, because- because looking forward! Not back!" Dib glanced down at him, pen poised over a blank sheet of paper, and Wheatley quailed slightly for reasons he didn't know. "But if I was looking back, I could tell you that- that I came from *That Place*. No... no reason I should talk about it, really, you've um, you've probably heard of it. Bloody huge underground science facility and- and all. Really no need for me to elaborate." There was the scratching sound of Dib writing something down in that notebook. Wheatley blinked. "Huge science facility? Underground... in, er... starts with an M... Michigan. That's it. Huge underground science facility in Michigan. We're not anywhere near Michigan, are we? Hope not..."

Dib looked at him again. "We're in Michigan."


"You don't want to go back where you came from?" Dib asked, sounding surprised again.

"N... no. Definitely not." Wheatley shuddered. He looked away. "No way, *never*, unless it was to... well... there's someone there that I sort of... I have to tell her something. I hadn't thought of that 'til now, bit busy trying to figure out what happened after I fell down from space and all that. But I do need to- to tell her, just... I do *not* want to go back. Bit of a dilemma, since that's almost certainly where she is. Never really considered that. Never knew with absolute certainty that I would actually make it back to Earth, to be honest, so I didn't know if I'd *actually* get to see her again. Still don't
have much of a chance, unless I went back to the facility, which would pretty much mean certain death for little ol' me. Do you think you could open, possibly, some sort of communications link to—?"

"Wait, wait, what place are you talking about?" Dib interrupted. Wheatley was completely unused to being cut off and the question threw him off for a moment.

"The- the facility," he said, his optic shrinking and flicking back and forth. "That Place. I told you. It's… that horrible, bloody awful place."

Dib's brow furrowed and he tapped his pen against his notebook. "I really need to know—"

"Aperture Science!" Wheatley shouted at last. "All right? That's the name. Or Aperture Laboratories, same thing really. The bloody awful science facility I was talking about? Aperture Laboratories!" His entire chassis was shivering uncontrollably. Inwardly, he tried to berate himself for getting so worked up over the name of the place. If anything about himself could be considered moronic… it was that.

The human jerked a little. "I've heard of that before!" he said, and jumped to his feet. "Wait right here!" With that he was off, running back into the house. Wheatley was left in the grass with no choice but to stay put.

"All right, I'll just… be here, then," he said to no one. "Waiting. In this…" he narrowed his optic again to keep the scratchy stalks away, "…lovely grass. Not lovely. To be honest I think I've decided that I really hate the stuff." He glanced over at the house. "What's he even doing in there, anywaaAAAAUUGGH!"

His optic contracting to a blue point, he looked upwards in an effort to catch a glimpse of the thing had just landed on top of him. Sharp little talons dug into his upper handle and a face with a pointed yellow beak leered down into his own. "AUGH! BIRD! BIRD! GEDDOFF ME! GET OFF!" He flailed his upper handlebar frantically and the bird simply hopped onto the top of his hull. "Oh, good, it's go—No! AGH! Still here! AGGGHHH! HELP!"

There was the sound of a door slamming and then running footsteps as Dib sprinted into view, the movement causing the bird to finally flutter away. Wheatley's optic whipped back and forth in a panic until he managed to convince himself that it was gone for good, at which he took a shaky, simulated breath.

"What happened?" Dib demanded, crouching down in front of him. "Was it Zim?"

Wheatley had no idea what a "Zim" was and he didn't care. His optic contracted again, this time in fury. "A bloody bird landed on me!" he said, and his voice rose in pitch. "What was it- what was it even doing? I'm not made of bird food, thank you very much! Metal! That's what I am! Metal!"

Dib gave a disbelieving laugh. "That's it?"

"Oh, yeah, real funny." Wheatley scowled. "I'm a real laughingstock, afraid of a little bird. Just so you know they don't look all that little to me… and have you seen how sharp their beaks are? Could put an eye out! Or optic, could put my optic right out! Nasty!" He curled his handles around himself, both as a reflexive move to display his horror and to deter any other birds from using him as a perch.

The human sat down beside him again, carrying a slim laptop under his arm. He gave Wheatley an odd look. "So you're ornithophobic?"

Wheatley glanced at him and blinked, still trying to calm down. "Er…? No, don't think so. Pretty-preety sure I can't get any sort of disease. The facility's always been sterile and besides, I am a
Dib shook his head. "It means you're afraid of birds," he said.

Wheatley blinked again. "Isn't... everyone?"

The human let out a little chuckle—Wheatley realized indignantly that it was probably at his expense—and flipped open the laptop. He quickly tapped in his login and opened a browser window.

"I was joking, of course," Wheatley put in as Dib started a search for 'Aperture Laboratories.' "No one's afraid of birds. Definitely not me, hah, love 'em! ...Well, not really. I don't love them, but I'm not afraid of them. Not love, not fear, more of a... respectful tolerance."

"I got it!" Dib announced. He thrust the laptop in front of Wheatley's optic, causing him to blink several times as the blue aperture readjusted to focus on the screen. "This is the best search result for Aperture Science—is it right?"

Wheatley optic flicked over the webpage, quickly reading the titles. "Um, er, yes, that looks right."

Dib pulled the laptop back, shaking his head at Wheatley in awe. "You can read."

Wheatley bristled, doing his best to ignore the faint memories of similar jibes he had once been taunted with. "Of course I can read! I am not illiterate. I could write, too, if I had a pen. And... hands. And lack of hands does not signify illiteracy, either. I read all the time!"

Dib looked taken aback. "I just meant that—"

"D'you know I once read Machiavelli, for fun?" Wheatley continued. "And to prove a point. An... intellectual point. But mostly for fun. The whole thing, cover-to-cover! In five minutes! I've read, y'know, Dickens, Shakespeare, the bloke who wrote about the hobbit-things... all the classics, really... yeah. You could probably say that I've read every book ever written, but not bragging! Not bragging!"

Dib frowned. "I only meant that it's amazing you can read! Considering you're a—"

"A what?" Wheatley snapped, with more force than necessary.

"A robot."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Wheatley blinked once, twice, plink, plink, trying to process what he had just heard. Or, to be more precise, what he had not heard.

"...Oh." His cracked optic darted back and forth between Dib and the area off to his right. "That's, uh, that's what I thought you were gonna say."

Dib gave him a strange look and then simply turned back to the laptop. He squinted at the screen. "Well, that's weird. The page says it hasn't been updated since sometime in the 1990s. It's too pixilated to read the exact year. Did they close down the company or something?" He scrolled down and his eyes widened. "Wait, there's not even anything here! It's blank. It's completely blank!"

Wheatley winced. Three guesses who had been the one to wipe the webpage.

Dib hit the back button and opened another search result. This one was a news article about the facility being closed down due to a "catastrophic accident" that had killed most of the workers. Wheatley shifted uncomfortably.
"That's where I've heard the name before," Dib said, his eyes roving over the laptop screen. "Dad was talking about it a long time ago. The entire facility got gassed somehow."

Images rose unbidden to the forefront of Wheatley's mind. *Bring Your Daughter to Work Day,* childish science projects carted in with tarps covering them to conceal the precious potato battery data, the vents in every room opening at the same time and hissing yellow clouds of deadly neurotoxin billowing through... He remembered that at the time he hadn't been quite sure what was going on. All the humans below him had seemed to suddenly be wracked with insanity; writhing, clutching at their throats, falling to the ground and twitching before finally going still. No matter what he said, no matter who he threatened to report them to or how many times he said he'd drop down off his management rail (not that he'd actually do that, back then) and land on their heads if they kept lying there, they wouldn't get up again, or even move. At last he gave up and left the room in disgust, just leaving them on the floor. It wasn't until later that he learned that something toxic had been released into the air. All the humans he'd thought he was talking to had been long dead by the time he'd left.

*Bring Your Daughter to Work Day.* Just another sign of how ruthless *She* could be when She wanted. The plight of humans had never concerned him particularly much, but that day had been downright horrific and there had never been a time when he'd been gladder that he didn't have lungs.

"It wasn't an accident," he muttered. Dib didn't appear to hear him, because he kept on reading and then went back to check other sites.

Something flew by alarmingly fast on the black pavement in front of Dib's house and Wheatley shrank away from it. "What was that?"

"Car," Dib replied without looking up.

Car. Car. Wheatley searched his databanks for what on Earth a "car" was and got the answer that it was a boxy-thing that humans rode around in when they didn't want to walk. So... sort of a management rail for things that had legs. Only with no rail. Unless the car in question was actually something called a "train," which apparently *did* have rails. Confusing, to say the least.

He was beginning to wish Dib would take him back inside. He wasn't sure he was ready for *this* much outdoors.

The Cooperative Testing Initiative had apparently not taken the hint.

Blue now wielded his scuffed and dented portal device on his one remaining arm and could only move in a hobbling fashion, leaning all of his weight on Orange due to his missing foot.

Oh, Blue had been destroyed many times since he had first acquired those injuries, of course. Technically he should have been reassembled with all of his missing parts miraculously restored. However, a few words to the Assembly Machine had made it clear that neither android was to be returned to perfect condition until they had learned their lessons.

They weren't learning.

She had known all along that *real* Science could not be furthered with data extracted from tests performed by robots. Robots that She had created herself. She needed humans. Unfortunately, the humans that Blue and Orange had recovered for Her had so far proved to be utterly useless. None of them made it far through the test chambers; certainly not anywhere near as far as *she* had gotten.

*That* test subject had been a major problem. But she was gone, now, as she should be. Statistically
Speaking, there had to be other humans out there that would excel at the tests She created—excel, further Science, and not have the relentless drive to destroy things and exact revenge that that subject had displayed.

So far She had failed to find those humans.

As She watched through Her camera feeds, Orange lost her balance while the two partners were making their way over a Hard Light Bridge, and knocked both herself and Blue into the pool of acid below.

"Oh, it appears you've tripped into an acid pool due to Orange's clumsiness and Blue's lack of limbs," She sighed. "I've lost track of how many times I've warned you about that. Maybe, if you'd listen, you would gain back your limbs, and then you'd be less likely to fall into acid pools. I can't say I see that happening anytime soon, though… In fact, I'd say you've trapped yourselves in a vicious cycle. So, good luck with that."

The androids were reassembled seconds later, tumbling out of the machine with even fewer components than they had started with. Orange was now missing a hand and the Assembly Machine had apparently outright refused to provide a new, valuable portal gun for her.

Oh, well. Perhaps now She could test how well two robots with one portal device between them could navigate a chamber that had been designed for two portal devices to be utilized.

Chapter End Notes

There was a clear disadvantage when *Science*, and not even a particularly pleasant aspect of it, was literally the only thing you knew.

There was also a disadvantage when you had no job, your only memories stemmed from being nothing more than a glorified lab rat, and you were walking around wearing a tattered orange jumpsuit from the *Facility* along with dingy but still functional long-fall boots. Not to mention carrying a charred, bulky cube with pink hearts painted on each side.

And it was made even worse when, soon after arriving in a strange city, you just happened to run into a high-ranking employee of the biggest science facility in the area and were pretty much hired on the spot, without even so much as an *interview*—just because you were so obviously associated with the place you never wanted to think about again—whether you liked it or not. An entire year later and nothing had changed.

Chell trudged home with her face set in a scowl. Her black bangs clung to her sweaty forehead and she swiped one arm across it to wipe them away. Under her other arm she carried a fat folder, the label of which couldn't be read in the darkness. The flashlight she always carried with her was tucked away at the bottom of her satchel. She had to make her way home without it tonight, as the thing had flickered and gone out about two seconds after she had tried to turn it on earlier.

"*They told me, if I ever turned this flashlight on, I would DIE! They told me that about everyth—*"

The sudden intrusion on her thoughts startled her and when she recognized it she brought it to an immediate, screeching halt. Angryly she shoved the memory—that *voice*—to the back of her mind and buried it as deeply as she could.

She gritted her teeth and clenched the folder so tightly that it bent. Why had that memory even resurfaced? Was something as simple as thinking about a *flashlight* enough to… to…?

Chell blinked, momentarily taken aback. The folder she'd been carrying had been flung onto the ground, thrown wide open, with the papers that made up its contents scattered around it. Next she
came to notice that she had slipped into an attack pose and was breathing heavily.

She calmed her breathing, irritation at herself (and at the old emotions dredged up by the memories) stewing in her gut. Not again.

Slowly she picked up the folder, shuffling the papers back together and sliding them back into the flimsy cardstock pockets.

A year after being released from... That Place... and she still couldn't control the occasional bouts of rage that rose up unbidden at the slightest provocation. Whatever she was holding, she either threw or broke.

Once the papers had all been collected she rested on her ankles and ran her hands over her face, her dark, silver-streaked hair falling forward in a curtain around her ears as she slowly shook her head from side to side. This job... It brought up too many memories that she would rather just forget.

She supposed she was lucky Membrane Labs had hired her, though. With her meager skill set, which basically consisted of jumping and the ability to fire a portal gun with marked precision, she wasn't sure what else she could do.

Chell had only met the CEO of Membrane Labs (its namesake Professor Membrane) once, when she had first started working there. Around that time she'd wondered what his first name was, since it was never mentioned. Then one of her co-workers had assured her that Membrane was his first name, and no one seemed to know what his surname was. Strange that two famous and influential scientists, Professor Membrane and Cave Johnson, had unusual nouns for first names.

At last she dragged herself out of her thoughts, tucked her folder under one arm again, and stood once more. It was still a long way back to her apartment.

Her head dipped forward slightly at the thought that she probably needed a car. Needed one, but didn't particularly want one. Her own two legs had never failed her before and she didn't much like the idea of depending on a clunky metal box with wheels to get her where she needed to go. The thought of driving just seemed wrong, somehow.

But of course, maybe that was exactly why she should do it. The corner of her mouth twisted up in a wry, half-hearted smile.

After another half hour of walking she finally made it back to her apartment complex, letting out her customary little ashamed sigh when she caught sight of the state of the place.

Life had not been kind to Chell since she had left That Place. Living in the rattiest apartments in town, earning very little money by doing the one thing she knew but hated... Still. Chell took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The air smelled thick and disgusting, but on the plus side it lacked the pristine, chemical scent of the test chambers she had been forced to run for so long. It was another sign that, against all odds, she was free.

Chell made her way up the stairs to her own apartment, walking with a slight but noticeable limp. She still wasn't sure where exactly she had gotten it. It could have been from any number of things that had happened to her at the Facility; after all, she still had received little to no medical attention for any of it. If she ever encountered some sort of problem, she simply pushed past it until it went away on its own—just as she had been accustomed to doing ever since she had first woken up in a small glass room with barely any idea of where she was. The limp had been there for almost the entire year she'd been free, though. That was stupid.
She had hardly set foot in the apartment when the phone on the wall rang. Chell closed and locked the
door, dropping her folder on the card table where she usually sat to eat, but didn't bother to kick off
her shoes before picking up the phone.

"Chell?" a tight male voice asked. It was Mr. Simmons, right hand man to Professor Membrane. "I'm
calling to tell you that we need those calculations by tomorrow. We're inches away from finishing the
project but there's always something wrong with the numbers you give us. Why were you
so insistent on working on this if you barely know what you're doing? We can't even afford to switch
you with someone else now! We're too close!"

Chell offered no response and her face remained stoic.

Mr. Simmons grunted. "Get those numbers in by tomorrow, and make sure they're right, or I'm sorry,
we're going to have to fire you. We'll just have to deal with the setbacks." He hung up.

Chell lowered the phone onto the table with her hand resting on it, staring at nothing. They had been
threatening to fire her for months. Nothing had been done yet.

She hung the phone back on its receiver and went into the kitchen, setting a pot of water on the stove
to boil. Then she sat down at the table and rested her gaze on the folder.

'Artificial Intelligence Experiment 238: Sentience'

The last word was in bold, a larger font, and was followed by a plethora of exclamation points. Chell
couldn't exactly say she shared in its optimism. She flipped open the folder, closely examining her
notes on the calculations and formulas needed for the newest experiment on sentient artificial
intelligence. As far as she could tell they were quite good. Very accurate.

Fortunately, Chell was highly skilled in the art of breaking things.

The house phone was ringing off the hook, actually rattling in its receiver on the table. Eventually the
base Computer got fed up enough with the noise that it alerted Zim, who threw on his disguise in his
underground base and allowed an elevator to take him to the surface.

The phone never rang this incessantly, not unless GIR had kept a rented movie for weeks past its due
date again. Perplexed, Zim picked it up. "Hello?"

The excited person on the other end started babbling immediately. "Listen, I know where those space
probes came from—!

"How did you get my phone number, Dib-filth?!" Zim snarled into the phone, balking at the familiar
voice.

"Keef gave it to me. I guess you must've given it to him when you were doing that stupid friend
thing," Dib replied.

Keef knew his phone number? Zim made a mental note to take care of that carrot-haired human's
memory later.

"Look, Zim, I wanted to let you know that I got the other core working today and it told me where
they came from. Have you ever heard of a place called Apert—?"

"NO!" Zim cut in. "What space probes? Don't call me, human. Your voice is stupid."
"The space probes I brought to your doorstep last night!" Dib reminded him. "The ones you said would explode in my face? They're actually called cores. Turns out they're from a science facility called Aperture Laboratories. Have you heard of it?"

"Why would I have heard of it?" Zim snapped.

"Look, Zim, I called you as a last resort," Dib said. "The facility has a webpage, but the entire thing's been wiped. The only other thing I could find was a news article saying it had been gassed, everyone in it died, and the entire place caved in. I asked around my paranormal forums to see if anyone knew anything about it other than that, but they didn't."

"Why do you insist on boring me to death with your drivel?" Zim asked, his eyelids drooping.

Dib just raised his voice slightly. "Think about those two cores I found! They were up in space but they clearly weren't made for it, and they came from that facility—even though everyone's supposed to be dead! I'd say it's all really suspicious, wouldn't you? And they're some of the most advanced technology I've ever seen!"

That caught Zim's attention. "What? Nonsense!"

"They're sentient!" the human said excitedly. "Much more sentient than your stupid robots, even. I've never seen anything like it!"

Zim paused. "And, they came from… where, again?"

"Never mind about that. Since you don't know anything, I'm gonna go try to—"

"Give me one!" Zim commanded.

Dib stopped talking for a moment, taken aback. "What?"

"Give me the space probes!" Zim said. "Let's see how 'advanced' they are when they're disassembled in a pile of scrap."

"What? No! I'm not gonna give you—"

"GIR's advanced," Zim interrupted with more than a hint of pride. "There's no way your stolen robots are anywhere near his caliber."

"Forget it, Zim." Dib hung up without so much as a farewell taunt. Zim glowered at the phone still clenched in his hand, and then slammed it on the receiver.

Once again the human had no idea whom he was dealing with.

Dib put the phone back on its receiver, chewing the inside of his cheek. Any sort of information about this science facility was proving difficult to unearth, but of course that just made him more determined. He turned off the TV—which was playing some sort of special on sentient clouds instead of the new Mysterious Mysteries episode he'd been promised—and climbed back upstairs.

It was getting late again and he entered his room with the full intention of going to bed. However, he quickly realized that unless he wanted to go the night without any sleep, he'd have to put both cores somewhere outside his room until morning. Either that or find some heavy-duty earplugs.

"All I'm saying is that there is clearly something wrong with the sky here," Wheatley was declaring from his spot on the desk, where Dib had set him back down after their return inside. At Dib's arrival
the core looked up. "Oh! Good! I wanted to ask you about the sky. Did you see it, earlier? Did you see it? Brown! The sky was brown! What kind of bizarre weather pattern is that supposed to signify, anyway? Rain? …Mud? Raining mud? Didn't know that was possible, pretty sure it's not. But I mean the sky is supposed to be blue. Everything I've ever read says the sky is blue."

"STARS!" the yellow-eyed Space Core squealed next to him, catching sight of the night sky outside Dib's window. "I SEE STARS!"

"I think your sky is broken, mate. Someone should really check up on that. You should get a man in. In my opinion."

Dib massaged the skin under his eye with his fingertips. "Look, I'm going to put you both out in the hall for the night, okay?"

Wheatley swiveled to face him, optic wide in surprise. "What? The hall? Wait, what's wrong with your—" He cut himself off as Dib hoisted him up by the handles and walked to the doorway, setting him on the floor outside his room. He then followed suit with the Space Core, putting him next to Wheatley. As soon as both cores were out of his room he closed his door again.

The room was silent now. All right, so maybe dumping the cores outside was a little cruel, but Dib knew he needed the quiet. He wasn't used to people making conversation with him at the best of times, let alone while he was trying to sleep. He'd visit with the cores again in the morning. Maybe he'd even manage to get some more information out of them. In fact, he'd gotten an idea for how that might be accomplished...

For a moment, the hallway was hushed, with the only light being the strange mixed glow put off by the cores' respective stratosphere-blue and gold optics.

Wheatley blinked. "…Oh." He stared at the bedroom door, then rolled his optic about in his casing as he scanned up and down the hallway. "All- all right, then. This is as nice a place as any, I suppose. In the dark hallway of a strange building. At night. In the dark. Alone. Well, except for you, obviously." He cast the Space Core a quick glance, then his vision flicked back to the closed door. "He probably wants to go into, ah, sleep mode—sleep, just regular sleep, I mean—and- and, er, didn't want us to keep him up. Humans are sort of sensitive about that kind of thing, I think. That's the- that's the only reason he put us out here, obviously."

"I like it here. I like it. Hey," Spacey said, rocking back and forth as he wagged his handlebars and glanced at Wheatley. "Hey."

"Yes?" Wheatley asked, a bit uncertainly.

The Space Core blinked, his lower optic shield pulling up in a smile. "Are we going back to space?"

Wheatley shivered. "I bloody well hope not, mate."

Suddenly he quailed and the aperture of his optic contracted tightly. What if this new human—Dib—what if he did send them back into space? What if he did something worse? Like… like… What if he sent them back to the Facility?

Wheatley huddled into his casing, blinking rapidly and simulating heavy breathing. Would he do that? No, no, of course he—what if he was in league with Her? Why else would he toss them out in the hallway to fend for themselves? His vocal synthesizer rasped out a choked, garbled croak at the thought.
When Wheatley had been falling from space, he’d been absolutely sure that She was the one behind it. He’d all but given up, right then and there, knowing that if the mistress of the Facility was controlling his downward plunge then he had no way, no way to avoid whatever fate was awaiting him. But then when he had come back online just a few hours earlier, he’d found himself somewhere else entirely: a human’s bedroom. Just a plain, normal, everyday human’s bedroom (presumably, as he’d never actually visited one before today).

It seemed he had been wrong about Her. And it seemed there was still a small spark of hope left for him, after all. A slightly bigger spark now, actually, given that he was no longer incapacitated in space. Maybe this human could help him somehow. If Wheatley could trust him, of course. Okay, I’ll come up with a quick test, he thought. The moment the word crossed his mind he flinched. Sorry, experiment. Let’s say experiment. Right. If this human DOES NOT send us back to space or back to the Facility, then he’s on our side. No doubt about it. I can tell him all about everything. At some point. Possibly. But, um, the other hand- on the other hand, if he does send us to space or to, to the —back There, then um… he is clearly not on our side, and I’ll… Well, in that scenario there isn’t really much I could do except… er… nothing.

He sincerely hoped Dib wouldn’t send them off anywhere.

But your track record with humans hasn’t been all that fantastic so far, mate, a snide little voice on the very edge of his processor said. Him earning your trust is all well and good, but how the bloody heck do you expect to earn his trust? What happens when he finds out what happened to all the others? You’ve killed how many humans, ten thousand and six? Ten thousand and seven by now, probably. There’s no way that lady could’ve survived testing this long.

Shut up! It’s not like he needs to know about that! Wheatley thought furiously, shoving the unwanted comments away from the forefront of his mind. He’d do better this time, he would, he’d make sure of it. He was out of That Place now, he was away from Her, away from the poisonous mainframe —But you’re not away from yourself. Those things didn’t cause your monstrous behavior back at Aperture so it doesn’t even matter that they’re out of the equation now, does it? That was ALL YOU, and you know it.

I said shut up! Wheatley wailed in his mind, spinning wildly in his casing. "It’s not my fault! That was not my fault. That was the bloody awful body I was in and that blasted Itch, nothing else! All right? I didn’t even know what I was doing half the time and—" That’s a lie. "—Well who asked you, anyway? And I never would’ve done it if the mainframe hadn’t—" Are you sure? "I mean, I —agh, why can’t I—"

"Hey."

The tone of that single syllable was so cold and hostile that Wheatley froze completely, one hundred percent certain for a split second that She had actually found him at last. Slowly he rotated his inner casing to face in the direction of the voice, his optic a mere pinprick of faint blue light.

A girl was standing in the hall behind him. She squinted down at Wheatley, her eyes narrowed so far that he couldn’t even make out the whites; they along with most of the rest of her face were nothing more than black shadowy pits, somehow even darker than the surrounding gloom of the hallway. She was wearing an outfit that seemed to be all one piece—with even her hands and feet covered—and had a zipper down the front. Two small bat-like wings protruded from her back and Wheatley honestly wasn’t sure if they were just part of the outfit or if they were actually attached to the girl herself.

"…Er, hello," Wheatley managed to say. He tried to recall who this person was but was pretty sure he’d never seen her before.
The girl glared down at him, opening one eye wide enough that in the dim light he could see an amber iris, the same color as Dib's. "I don't know what you are," she said in a slow, even tone, "but you're talking so much that I can't sleep."

"Um. Er, sorry, um, Luv."

Both of the girl's eyes were open now. "What did you just call me?"

"Nothing!" Wheatley said. "I just called you, um, 'Glove.' Yes." He silently begged Spacey to do something but their radio connection was badly damaged and apparently he hadn't picked up the art of telepathy, because the yellow-eyed core continued to twitch and babble about nothing but space-related paraphernalia. "Also I've just been… talking to myself, yeah. Bit stupid, really, but I do that on occasion, and I'm really sorry I disturbed you… um, whoever… you… are." He shivered. Something about this girl scared him out of his circuitry.

The girl just grunted and closed her eyes again. "You're one of Dib's things, aren't you? I saw him carrying around you stupid spheres all day and trying to tell Dad how you're so intelligent."

"Intelligent?" Wheatley perked up somewhat, awe spreading through his processor. Intelligent? Someone—a human—had been trying to prove he was intelligent?

"Just stop making noise," the girl said, turning away. "Or I'll throw both of you out in the yard. It's supposed to rain tonight." With that, she left, making her way silently back down the hall and into a different room. The door closed with a soft click.

Wheatley hunkered down in his casing and turned to the core next to him. "Right… you heard 'er, Spacey. No noise. Absolutely no noise, one hundred percent silence. All the time. Silence. Otherwise we'll end up out in the rain, which does not sound ideal, or- or we'll end up somewhere worse. Back There, maybe."

"Space?" the yellow core piped up instantly.

"No, the other 'There.' The Facility."

"QUIET!" the girl shouted from her room, and Wheatley immediately fell silent.

It was going to be a long night.

---

Morning sunlight filtered in through the round windows above Dib's bed as he knelt in front of his closet, rummaging around in an old cardboard box.

"All right, this is the cord with the closest matching plug I can find," Dib said at last, standing back up with a long black cable coiled in his arms. He put the box back away and closed the closet again. "It should work, but it might be a little glitchy." He unraveled the cord, plugging one end into one of his dad's ancient USB adaptors and in turn fitting that into his computer. He held the other end of the cord up to show Wheatley. "Okay. Ready?"

The core's upper lid drooped and he gave Dib an uneasy look. "...Having second thoughts about this, actually. I've never been plugged into an actual… you know, computer computer like that before. I mean who knows, it might have some sort of virus that affects robots, too. But um… If it'll answer your questions, and as- as long as I don't have to talk about the Facility…"

Dib gave a brisk nod, swiveling the core around on the desk. "Yeah. All right, let's find out about this horrible science facility of yours."
Wheatley craned his optic to try to see behind him while Dib examined the three small prongs on his back port. When he clipped the end of the plug into the port Wheatley gave a violent jerk, yelping. Dib released the plug immediately.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing! Nothing," Wheatley stuttered. "I'm fine. Just surprised me is all."

Dib rotated Wheatley back around to face him, sat down in his desk chair, and then turned his attention to the computer. Text started flickering up on the monitor:

/\New device detected
/\Origin unknown
/\Scanning for origin... Processing...
/\Mark IV Personality Construct copyright Aperture Laboratories 199_ [error data corrupt]
/\Open connection with device y/n

"What's it doing?" Wheatley asked, shuffling his handles to try to face the screen. Dib turned him towards the monitor, making sure the cable remained secure. He punched the 'y' key and the text on the screen vanished. Despite having Wheatley plugged in, everything on the screen still looked the same. Maybe there was something wrong with the—

The screen went dark.

"Oh. It's black," Wheatley said after a pause. He glanced at Dib. "Do I, er... Should I try to hack it?"

"No, hang on," Dib said. He pressed a few buttons on the keyboard but it didn't affect anything. Maybe Wheatley should try to "hack" it, although... That seemed kind of like a bad idea. "Can you access anything?" he asked hesitantly, turning his head to the robot. Wheatley's optic shutters narrowed in a squint at the screen.

"Yeah... yes, I think I—Let's try this..."

There were a few beeps and the monitor flared up with a blindingly bright image of a white background featuring a black, circular, shuttered logo exactly like the ones etched underneath the optics of the two cores. The black logo faded to a muted gray and more text blossomed into existence in front of it.

Welcome, Aperture Science personnel, to the automatic AI inspection server! This server will inspect your Aperture Science Personality Construct for any circuitry damage or corruption. To access, please sign in.

Username: 

Password: 

"Inspection server?" Wheatley said. "Never heard of that before. Must be new. Oh, also, that does not look good. Username and password. Nasty. Not sure I can hack that, y'know, both of those at the same time. Little bit tricky."

"Hang on," Dib mumbled. Why was Wheatley so bent on hacking things? Dib moused over to the
bottom of the screen where a tiny link labeled 'Create New' could barely be seen, and clicked it.

Hello, and welcome, new and valued faculty member of Aperture Laboratories! Welcome to the wonderful world of SCIENCE! You are about to embark on a fantastic journey of testing, data, experiments, and more testing. Create your personal account here. (note: all Aperture Science employee accounts will be closely inspected five times a day at random and unposted times.)

*Username:

Password:

Confirm password:

*Full name:

Email:

*Social security number:

Birth date:

*Mother's maiden name:

*Allergies (and severity of said allergies):

*Address:

*Close family/friends:

*Elementary and middle school GPA (if applicable):

*High school GPA:

*College degree and GPA:

*Awards won:

*Experiences with SCIENCE:

*required field

Thank you for helping us help you help us all. :)

Note: If this is Greg and you just forgot your password again, you're fired.

"...Or you could fill out one of those things," Wheatley said. "Careful, though, if you make a fake account, it says they check those things five times a day. They may catch on or something."

"Everyone who used to work there died," Dib reminded him. He quickly filled in the form with information off the top of his head and hit enter, then typed in a few commands.

The screen fizzled out to be replaced by pages and pages of scrolling code of which Dib could only decipher a fraction. Names scrolled up, too, along with their birthdates—no, death dates… ‘ASHPD
test 18,' 'ASHPD test 25,' and so on. Some—no, he realized again, most—weren't even named, just labeled with things along the lines of 'Test subject 00054.' Dib began to feel a bit queasy.

"'Test subject'?' He cast a cursory glance at Wheatley.

"Oh, yeah, there used to be loads of them," the core replied nonchalantly. "Ten thousand, give or take. They were all sort of sealed away when She was shut down and uh…" He stumbled over his words. "Well, long story short, they all died… most of 'em."

Dib's eyes widened as he watched the scrolling names. There were so many of them…

He'd had enough. Quickly he typed in the first command he could think of and let the screen go to something else.

"Okay, I'm going to look up everything I can about Aperture Science," he said to Wheatley. "Try not to—"

The screen changed, though he hadn't told it to. It was replaced by a jittering scene, tinted blue, of some sort of shady hallway. The viewpoint shifted from wall to wall as if whatever this image had come from was looking around, then it cut to black and came into view again. Just like a blink. The camera went up to a nearby door and a handlebar came into view, and rapping on the door to create a knocking sound.

"Hello? Anyone in there? Hellloooo?" Wheatley's voice called, but it was coming from the computer rather than the robot himself. The real Wheatley's eye widened as the recording continued. "Are you going to open the door? At any time?"

"Oh! I think it's playing one of my memory files!" he said. "You don't have to- you don't have to watch those—"

The scene changed again in a short fit of static. There was more rolling along above an empty hallway, absolutely no one around—then in the distance there was a black, sparking podium that looked like it should be holding something—then there was falling—travelling along catwalks, suspended in the air by arcs of electricity fizzing from a white gun that a woman held poised in her arms—a giant, white and black, bulky thing with what looked like a yellow optic, which never turned to look at the screen—then flashes of static and vibrant colors and then black—

At the sight of the memory on the screen, Wheatley shuddered and pulled into his casing.

The scenes began progressing more rapidly, so fast that Dib couldn't keep up with them. There were more flashes—a bright white light—a woman in an elevator rising off the floor—shattered glass everywhere—white robots being shoved together with giant bulky cubes—an array of flat panels with spikes on the bottom, surrounding a woman standing alone on a platform—fast, confusing images of a wide room with blue, orange, and white paint splattered across the floor—blackness, stars, the craggy white surface of the moon, space—

"All right, all right, stop! STOP!" Wheatley cried, cringing away from the screen. "I think you've got enough information now, haven't you? More than enough, definitely, so just—" he glanced at the screen, closed his optic again, and looked away. "—Just turn it off. Please."

"Are you sure?" Dib asked. "Can't we just—?" When Wheatley didn't respond, he pulled out the cord attaching the core to the computer and the memories flashing across the screen shut off at once.

Wheatley simulated a long, relieved sigh. "That's better. Much better. Thank you."
Glancing at the blank computer again, Dib's brow furrowed. "Bad memories?"

"You could say that," Wheatley replied, his eye downcast. "Not anything that needs to be worried about, though, haha!" He attempted one of the most unconvincing laughs that Dib had ever heard. "I've put it all behind me. All of it."

Dib took a long, deep breath. "Wheatley," he said evenly. "What exactly happened at Aperture Laboratories?"

"Professor Membrane, Sir—" A man poked his head into the room but stopped abruptly when his eyes fell on the only occupant. "…Oh, sorry. Do you know where Membrane is?"

Chell, sitting at a table at Membrane Labs where she was been rewiring a couple of electrical components, looked up. She dusted off her hands and stood with a shake of her head.

The man gave her an odd look before realization crossed his face. "Oh! You're the one that doesn't talk much." He looked down at the enormous stack of papers in his arms and bit his lip. "Hey, are you busy?"

Chell nodded.

"Good, good, I need a little help." The man, apparently having ignored her response, walked forward and dumped the papers into Chell's arms. "Can you do me a favor and hand these off to the professor? I have got to get back to work."

Without waiting for Chell to accept or deny the request, he turned and left. Chell narrowed her eyes at the space where he had gone. Well, she supposed she wasn't that busy. Also, it might be good to meet the "great" Professor Membrane again. She'd remember this, though, if that man ever asked her for another favor.

She frowned as she left the room. The professor could be anywhere. He hated the idea of working behind a desk—she wasn't sure if he even had an office. He wanted to be in the thick of things, working hard on some new invention or innovation and almost completely disregarding the existence of the entire rest of the staff in his fervor to create SCIENCE (oh how she hated that word). He was almost always at the lab, too, and Chell had heard from someone that he wasn't married, and he probably never had been, but he had two kids. How did he even take care of them?

But of course that wasn't actually her business (not that staying out of other people's business had ever bothered her before). She pushed her ponderings aside and turned her attention back to the task at hand—finding Mr. Membrane.

At last she heard his booming voice from down the hall and hurried to the closed door that led to it. She was just about to swing it open when she caught some of the words being spoken and paused with her hand hovering in front of the handle, wondering how long she could get away with eavesdropping.

"Not now, Son!" the professor was saying. "You told me about those robots yesterday, and I've told you that artificial sentience is not currently possible! Now run along, I am extremely busy today. We'll have to talk later."

"But Dad—" a boy's voice said. Either he was in the room with his father or Chell was overhearing a video call. "This is important! Well, everything I tell you about is important, but this is even more so! It's about a corrupt science facility! Remember the one that was gassed? You showed me the article about it years ago."
Chell's hand went slack on the door handle and her heart thudded faster, her gaze drifting up along the door and a shadow of horror flickering across her face. She struggled to calm herself down. There were lots of science facilities. The boy couldn't possibly be talking about—

''Dad, will you just listen?'' the boy said in an almost exasperated tone. ''This place has human test subjects and according to one of the robots I found, there's still one in there, and if someone doesn't get her out then she'll be killed. Here, Wheatley'll tell you! Go on, Wheatley.''

Chell's entire body seized up and her heart stopped working. Her wide-eyed stare at the door burned, as if the sheer power of her gaze was capable of searing a hole in the wood. No. No, this couldn't be happening. This wasn't real.

She should leave. She should just back away, run, never look back, she didn't have to stay here—

A third voice spoke. ''It's true! What he's- what he's tellin' you. It's all true.''

The entire stack of papers cascaded out of Chell's arms, hitting the floor with a whump.

For the whole of the last year she had only ever heard that voice in flashbacks and nightmares.

''That sounded like important documents being dropped!'' Professor Membrane said. ''We'll talk later, Son.''

''Dad!'' the boy's voice took on a pleading tone but was cut off. On a reflex, Chell grabbed the door handle and flung it open, stumbling into the room and taking it in with wild eyes. She found herself face-to-face with none other than Professor Membrane, who was turning around to open the door himself. In front of him hovered a floating screen—blank, now, but she was sure that a moment ago it had displayed the image of Membrane's son… and, unless her ears had deceived her, that… core.

Professor Membrane looked down at the pile of scattered papers in the hall in what she assumed to be dismay. ''Oh, I see! They're only more fan letters. Send them off to Simmons, would you? He'll answer them for me.''

The Professor walked briskly into the hall, sidestepped the papers without breaking stride, and marched off. He didn't even usher Chell out of the room.

Chell's harried look dissolved into her familiar stoic expression. Mechanically she walked back into the hallway and pulled the multitude of fan letters back into some semblance of a stack, wedging her fingers underneath it and lifting it back up. She stood for a long moment with her cold, calculating gaze resting on the hover screen. Then she turned on her heel and strode away from the door, drawn up to her full height and staring straight ahead down the hall with steely eyes and an odd expression on her face.

It was a look she was accustomed to wearing and which she wore well. It was a look of pure determination.

Chapter End Notes

"It was a nice try, I'll give it that. Y'know some people just don't listen, no matter what you say. I know from experience."

There was a sigh. "But this was important. You said yourself that someone was trapped in there."

"Well—yes. But, look, 'm just trying to lift your spirits a little. It's not the end of the world, really. Just try again later! Although it- it would be nice if he believed you, and soon, so we could y'know work at getting her out of there."

Gaz shifted in her position on the couch, curling her legs closer to her body. Without looking up she allowed her attention to stray from the game clutched in her hands, which was currently stuck on an insanely long loading screen anyway, to the two annoying voices that carried down from upstairs.

"So what now?" That was the dumb, blue-eyed robotic sphere speaking.

"I did have another idea," Dib replied. The voices were growing closer so Gaz assumed they were making their way toward the stairs. "I'm going to bring you and the Space Core right to Dad's lab. Once he actually sees you, he's gotta believe me!"

Gaz snorted. *Yeah, good luck with that one, Dib.*

"Why've you got that cord?" the sphere suddenly demanded, its tone accusatory. "If you're thinking of plugging me back into your computer, that is a big 'no,' mate."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Dib appear on the stairs with a black cable and the robot clutched in his arms. He took that thing everywhere he went these days. Maybe he'd found a kindred spirit in the talkative idiot.

"Not my computer again, but—" Dib cut himself off. "Oh, hi, Gaz."

"Going somewhere?" Gaz asked, still keeping her eyes glued to her screen.
"Dad's lab," Dib replied, setting the blue-eyed sphere down on the coffee table in front of the couch. He said to it, "Wait here. I'll go get Spacey."

"Dunno what you'd need him for, but all right," the sphere said. Dib dropped the black cable he'd been holding onto the table as well and then hurried back upstairs. Gaz raised her eyes slightly, one eyebrow cocking as she regarded the robot. It was pointedly looking away from her. She kept her gaze locked on it. Eventually its optic sneaked to the side to look peer at her; as soon as it caught sight of her looking at it, the blue light shrunk and whipped away again. Gaz allowed herself a silent smirk.

"SPACE! SpacespacespaceWE'RE GOING BACK TO SPACE—!"

…Which immediately turned into a wince at the assault on her eardrums. She turned to look at what Dib was dragging down the stairs this time. It was the other robot, the one with the yellow eye. Apparently it was even chattier than the blue-eyed sphere. Also, apparently it only liked to talk about one thing.

"See, he's more of a hindrance than a help, really," the sphere on the table piped up when it caught sight of Dib. "But if you really wanna bring him along, more power to you, I mean…"

Dib set down the yellow-eyed sphere next to the one with the blue eye, going to the garage door and pulling out the dirty old wheelbarrow he kept in there. He pushed it right through the living room, leaving streaks of dirt on the carpet, and loaded the two spheres into it as well as the black cord. They sat on top of a short stack of things that resembled books.

"I'll see you in a while, Gaz," Dib said, turning and rolling the wheelbarrow back to the garage. "Don't delete the Mysterious Mysteries episode I recorded last night!"

"Okay, really, what're we doing?" the blue-eyed sphere asked with a hint of nervousness in its oddly British-sounding voice.

"Well, you can interfere with electronic equipment," Dib mused aloud to the it. "And I'm guessing Spacey can, too. If I hook you guys up to Dad's computer, maybe he'll be more likely to believe me about you. You might even even be able to help him with his experiments!"

Dib pulled up short in front of the entrance to Membrane Labs, finding himself directly in front of a guard gripping a spear that had electricity dancing around the pointed tip. "I'm here to see my dad," Dib said.

The guard jabbed his finger to a sign on the wall. "Can't you read? No public admittance today!"

His mouth gaping open, Dib stared. "But I'm not the public! I'm Professor Membrane's son!"

The man stalked forward and brandished the electric spear. "Beat it, kid!"

Dib knew firsthand what it was like to be on the receiving end of one of those spears. His brow furrowed in an angry glare but he took hold of the wheelbarrow again and backed away a little. "I walked all the way across town to get here! With a wheelbarrow full of robots! Can't Dad just spare five minutes for me to tell him something? There's a life on the line!"

"I said beat it!" The man rushed forward and Dib jumped, wheeled around, and ran off as fast as he could with the wheelbarrow. When he was some distance away he jerked to a stop and looked back. The guard had returned to his post and was greeting a dark-haired woman that had emerged from the building. She barely responded, just waving him off before marching off down the sidewalk with her
back to them.

"SPACE LADY!" the Space Core shouted. Dib cast him an odd glance—man, this thing was even weirder than Zim's evil robot minion.

"Rude," Wheatley said, his upper optic shutter lowered in a frown at the guard. "He didn't have to go chasin' us off."

"How am I supposed to get Dad to believe me about this?!!" Dib demanded of no one in particular, throwing his arms out. "If he won't listen to me then we'll have a lot more trouble helping that friend of yours!" He planted his hands on his hips and glared at the laboratory.

"Space," the Space Core added helpfully.

Dib just picked up the end of the wheelbarrow and turned away, plodding along back toward his house. He'd come all this way for nothing—but, then, what had he really expected?

"What are these things, anyway?" Wheatley asked out of the blue.

Dib blinked. "What?"

"These book things we're sitting on." Wheatley tapped his lower handlebar on the cover of the spelldrive on which he was sitting atop. "What are they?"

"Spelldrives," Dib replied with a shrug. "They're like laptops with spells in them, but I can't use any of them. They're all powerless."

There was a pause as he walked. Then, Wheatley spoke up, "Well… you've got that cable, haven't you? Maybe I could—I dunno, maybe I could try hacking one of them. See if I could get it working for you."

Dib stopped. "You'd do that?"

"Well, er, sure!" Wheatley said, optic pulling into a smile. "I wouldn't mind taking a crack at it. Might be fun."

That was something Dib had never even considered. He'd only brought the spelldrives along because he hadn't taken the time to remove them from the wheelbarrow before rushing off with the cores to show them to his dad. Slowly, a grin spread across his face and he changed direction, heading toward Mystical Hill.

"So. Spelldrives," Wheatley said. His voice jittered and bounced with the rattling of the wheelbarrow over the grass. "Sounds intimidating, I'll be honest. Spelldrive. Unless it's actually just a spell checker or something. Somewhat anticlimactic."

"No, I told you, they cast spells," Dib corrected.

"Did you say space?" Spacey, perched next to Wheatley, piped up.

Wheatley rolled his optic. "He said 'spells,' mate. Not 'space.' They don't sound remotely the same. Well, maybe a little, they've both got the 'sp' sound at the beginning, then the 'sss' sound at the end, so I guess I can sort of see where you're coming from, but that's not the point."

Dib stopped and unloaded the two cores along with the three so-called "spelldrives" he'd brought, setting the lot of them down in the grass. He sat sown and pulled the nearest drive over to him,
flipping it open like a laptop. "Okay. I'll plug you in, and you try to restore the drives' powerpoints. Remember that—powerpoints. Ready?"

Wheatley's frame shuddered, his upper optic drooping and his face dipping down. "As long as it doesn't try and dig through my memories. Horrible."

Why had he agreed to this again? Wait, it had been his idea. Why had he suggested it, again? To prove he was useful?

Dib took the black cable he had used before and plugged one end into a rectangular port in the spelldrive, clipping the other end into the port in Wheatley's back. The connection opened immediately and Wheatley felt something stir on the other end of the line. He gave a start. There was something familiar about the flickering sensation from the other device. It was just like what he had felt when plugged into a receptacle in the facility. Was—was this thing sentient?

"'Ello? Anyone there?" he called out hopefully.

The electronic conscious of the spelldrive shifted again.

[Unknown presence detected]. The message popped silently into Wheatley's mind from the drive.

"Oh, hello! You can hear me!" he said. "And—oh, you're talking about—I'm the unknown presence. Ah. Don't worry, I'm only here to ask a question. Simple question! Could you possibly—?"

[Scanning for viruses]

"What? I haven't got any!" Wheatley said indignantly. "Also, pretty sure the plural of virus is viri, by the way. Like octopus has octopi. And nucleus is nuclei. See? But you probably didn't know that, I'll give you that one."

[Virus detected]

"I do not have a—"

[Rebooting firewall…]

[Firewall at 87% efficiency]

It was like someone wearing an enormous boot had decided it would be fun to give Wheatley a kick in the side port. He gasped, inner casing spinning, as the connection was forcibly slammed closed.

"Did it work?" Dib asked eagerly, scooting forward.

Wheatley righted himself and contracted his optic. "He said I've got a virus!" He said, outraged. "I haven't got a virus! Unless—ohhhh, it was that ornithophobic you said I had! I bet that's what it is! That must be the virus it was talking about! That bloody bird gave it to me, I'll bet. Dunno how but I hear they carry all sorts of diseases, maybe electronic ones as well!"

Dib closed his eyes for a long moment and then reopened them. "Ornithophobia means you're afraid of birds."

"Er, that's not a virus," Wheatley said. Dib just shook his head and unplugged the closed-off spelldrive, pulling over another. He plugged it in and Wheatley waited for the connection to open.

All that came across was creepy music with extremely repetitive lyrics. [Piggy piggy piggy piggy
"Errr… Hello?" Wheatley blinked twice.

"I… think this one is broken," Wheatley said to Dib. "It just keeps talking about pork."

The boy perked up in surprise. "Oh, that must be the one that leads to the Shadowhog dimension! I should set that one aside." He unplugged Wheatley once more, setting that drive a little ways away from the rest. "All right, last one."

Wheatley shifted the plates of his casing. "Gonna try a new tactic this time. Just let me at it!"

Dib plugged him, one last time, into the remaining spelldrive. Wheatley simulated taking in a deep breath.

"Rrrright then. Time to put my master hacker skills to work. Um, again. Hallo!" he said cheerfully to the drive's mainframe. "Have to say, it's a pleasure to meet you, Drive number…" His gaze drifted to the number printed on the spelldrive's casing. "…Uh, 017. Lovely day we're having, too. Of course, you can only take my word for it, since I'm fairly certain you don't have any sort of visual sensors, but I can assure you that it is a lovely day."

Wheatey blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Please state your serial number."

"Oh," Wheatley cast around in his memories, struggling to remember the number he'd been told long, long ago. "I'm, er… I'm… let's see here… From what I remember, there was a six. Definitely a six. And a four… 0… 6… 14. That's it! 0614. Call me Wheatley, though. Please. Numbers're too blinkin' hard to remember.

"Now, to the point of my little, er… meeting. With you," he continued. "I am the head of Spelldrive… Management—the new head, mind—and it seems there's been a slight misunderstanding. Y'see, this spelldrive is supposed to have…" He looked up at Dib, who held up three fingers. "…Three point powers. Sorry, powerpoints. And, as you can probably tell, it actually has a grand total of zero. Bit of a problem. So, do you think you could maybe… remedy the problem? Else I'd have to report you to the higher-ups at the ol' Spelldrive Management corporation and trust me, mate, no one wants that. Least of all me."

"It's new," Wheatley said quickly. "Quite new! From after your time, probably. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of us, honestly. And we would really appreciate it if you replaced some of those missing points—powerpoints—Otherwise I will be forced to report you. Literally no way around it, sorry."

"What?" Wheatley spluttered. "How in the name of—Look, I'm the head of Management, all right? Not whoever it was that just decided to give you a call! Joke's on him, too! I just made it all up! Why don't you call him back and tell him that? Hah!"
Dib looked down, massaging his forehead with the heel of his hand.

[Gotcha. Try something else, hotshot.]

Agh. He'd been tricked. Wheatley narrowed his optic shields. "All right, fair enough, your razor-sharp intellect saw through my clever lies. Smug tone not appreciated, mate. And—Could you stop laughing? Just for a minute? If Spelldrive Management was a thing, I would report you. Absolutely no qualms." He looped his optic in his casing. Dib was leaning back on his hands, giving Wheatley a cool and almost indifferent look. "Can you believe this guy?" Wheatley asked him. "Honestly." He sighed and turned back to the spelldrive. "Look, I'm thinking we might've gotten off on the wrong foot, 017. Want to, ah, start over? Just between you and me, it would really mean a lot for you to replace those powerpoints. It would be a real benefit to society, I'm sure. Might even save people, who knows. Orphans! Just think about it, you replacing those powerpoints could save the orphans! And the whales! Orphan whales! If that's not a good cause, I honestly don't know what is. Seriously. Also, if you do this one teensy favor for me, I'd be sure to put in a good word for you."

[Put in a good word to whom?]

That was actually a pretty valid question. "The… other spelldrives?" Wheatley asked tentatively.

The spelldrive's mainframe seemed to give a sigh. [Urgh... might as well. I'm not sure why I even bother anymore. Take your powerpoints, but don't ask again].

Wheatley blinked. "What—really? I can't believe that worked! Um, thanks!"

Dib scrambled up in shock. "It worked? It worked this time?"

In answer, three new powerpoints appeared on the screen, filling it to capacity. Dib jumped up in the air, a broad smile lighting up his entire face. "This is great! Oh man, which spell should we do first?"

Wheatley sifted through the spell files on the drive, hardly daring to believe their good fortune himself. None of the spells cost more than two powerpoints, but there were a lot of them. "Um… well, there's pyrokinesis, that is, setting things on fire with your mind, which sounds… disastrous, to say the least. Er, invisibility, but it looks like you're only invisible as long as you close your eyes. Amazing dancing talent, this other one where you open your mouth and all that comes out is music… Isn't that exactly what singing is? Teleportation… Those all cost one powerpoint. And oh, enlarged head…" Wheatley glanced at Dib. "—Might want to stay away from that one."

Dib scowled but Wheatley wasn't entirely sure why. The boy shook off the expression a moment later, though. "Those all sound pretty interesting!" He crouched in front of the spelldrive's screen and scrolled through the list. But then he backed away, unplugging Wheatley and reaching for Spacey. "Now that we know it works, I want to try the other spelldrive again. This is where having two cores comes in handy."

He plugged Spacey into the drive that had rudely put up a firewall against Wheatley.

"Are you space?" the defunct core asked it immediately. Wheatley watched in curiosity—Spacey seemed to be doing much better with that drive than he had. A few utterances of "SPACE!" and soon enough, all three powerpoint spaces were filled.

"Hey, it worked!" Dib cheered, going through those spells as well. "These look like attack spells. Look, with this one I could shoot lasers from my eyes!"

"Sounds painful," Wheatley said. "Human eyes are like jelly, aren't they? Not really made for shooting lasers, if I'm honest." He tried to imagine laser beams blasting from his own optic but
quickly dismissed the thought.

"Yeah, it seems like it would be a little impractical," Dib agreed. "Oh, here's one that makes you a master of swordfighting! Man, too bad I don't have a sword."

Something on Dib's wrist beeped. The boy pulled back the sleeve of his black coat to reveal a digital watch. He pressed a button on its side, and his eyebrows rose in surprise. "Gaz? What's wrong?"

"Zim's been hanging around the house." The bored voice of Dib's scary sister came from the watch. "I just thought you should know that he's been making really pathetic attempts to break in."

Dib jerked backwards. "Zim's trying to break in?!" He jumped to his feet, yanking the plug out of Spacey's port and slinging the yellow-eyed core into the wheelbarrow. "C'mon, we're going back home!" He picked up Wheatley and dropped him in as well, then levered up the wheelbarrow and ran back down the hill.

Wheatley glanced back at the three spelldrives that the boy had left simply lying there. "Er, aren't you going to…?

They'd already turned a corner and the drives were out of sight. Wheatley glanced around uncertainly but didn't bring the topic up again, wondering what could possibly have caused so much alarm and, yet again, who in Science this "Zim" was.

They had just reached the house when Dib's watch beeped again.

"You can stop freaking out now. I chased him off," his sister said from it. "While you're here though you can order a pizza. Dad said I wasn't allowed to do that anymore."

Dib looked considerably more irritated when he entered the house.

The night came quickly. Outside, underneath Dib's window, a shadow moved. It peeled itself away from the side of the blocky house and looked upward, thin black antennae slicked back and moonlight glinting off compound, reddish-purple eyes that were narrowed in concentration.

"We gonna play a prank on Dib?" a voice screamed excitedly from right beside Zim's hearing organs.

Zim scowled and shoved his robotic minion away. "Silence, GIR!" he shouted. He looked up at the circular window high above again. "MiniMoose? What has the Dib done with those robots? Report!"

A small shape darted across the window and suddenly Zim found himself face-to-face with a little purple moose that hovered in front of him. He blinked and nearly took a step back, but didn't, instead staring the robot right in its mismatched eyes. "Well?"

"Nyeh!" the moose chirped.

Zim rubbed his chin in thought. "So the strange robots aren't in the Dib-human's room anymore. This'll be easy! Where'd he put them, anyway?"

"Nyeh."

"The hallway," Zim confirmed. He scuffed the toe of his boot on the ground, brow furrowed. "All right, we'll have to go through Dib's room after all. Using silence. And stealth! GIR, you go first."

"OKEE-DOKEE!" GIR screamed. Fiery jets spurted from the bottoms of his feet and he took off
with a whoosh toward Dib's window, crashing into the wall directly above it full-force and tumbling back to the ground with a screech.

Zim grimaced. "Agh. Never mind, GIR, I'll go first." His antennae flicked and he turned to glare at his other minion. "MiniMoose, take me up!"

The moose-like robot obediently flew down, allowing Zim to grab him around the middle before lifting off again (with some amount of difficulty). Zim automatically kicked his legs out when they left the ground and struggled to keep a grip on the moose's slick plastic casing. "Mmf, slow down!" he snapped. The robot had begun to swerve a bit in his flight path due to Zim's jerky movements. MiniMoose made an apologetic squeak and righted himself, successfully pulling Zim close enough to Dib's window that he was able to drop down and grab onto the sill with his fingertips. Zim's claws slid from their sheathes and caught the windowsill, though they did not puncture the tips of his black gloves. His PAK legs sprang from his back and braced themselves on the wall to provide him with greater balance. At last he managed to scramble up onto the windowsill. He pushed the round window open, squeezing through and tumbling into the human's room with a raucous clatter as his PAK legs were pulled in behind him, rattling against the glass. The PAK legs retracted as soon as he landed and he lay still for a moment, listening intently for any sounds indicating that the human had awoken.

Dib merely groaned in his sleep and rolled onto his other side.

"Excellent!" Zim said, pulling himself to his feet. He turned back to the window, standing on tip-toe and waving out at GIR and MiniMoose. "Wait there, GIR! I'll find the robot spheres and throw them down to you!"

Without waiting to see if the SIR Unit responded, Zim crept across the room. It was still and silent and smelled like unwashed human and sweat and old socks. Disgusting. He paused for a moment by Dib's desk, regarding the computer sitting on top. He reached over and tapped the mouse, causing the screen to light up as if waiting for him. It needed a username and password. Egh, if he had time he might mess with that later. Who knew how many incriminating pictures Dib had on that filthy machine?

Now was not the time for that, though. He slipped out the door and nearly tripped over the two spheres pushed against the wall outside.

The spheres fixed him with stares produced by blue and yellow optics; they both blinked several times, probably out of surprise at his sudden appearance. Zim let his arms fall to his sides and looked at them with his head cocked. There was nothing impressive about these robots so far. Then again, when had human technology ever impressed him? Never. But still, he had to examine these. They were supposedly examples of some of the most advanced technology Earth had to offer. And besides, Dib had tried to keep him from them, further driving home the point that they were important. He had to see what they were capable of.

"Hello." The voice, sounding exceedingly human, came from the sphere with the cracked blue optic. "Um, didn't see you come in. You live here too, I'm guessing? Under the bed or something? Because… I didn't see you before, and if you'd gone through this hallway I would definitely have seen you, probably, since I don't actually sleep. Unless you can walk on ceilings, or something, but—wait, what's wrong with your head? …Er, sorry, that was a bit insensitive—but seriously, what've you got—"

"Shut your noise tube!" Zim said, not bothering to consider that this phrase made even less sense than usual under the current circumstances. He glanced back and forth between the two cores. They were big, and he wasn't sure he could bring both of them at once. He'd have to grab one, toss it
outside, and then come back for the other one. He reached down and took hold of the blue-eyed sphere by the handlebar protruding from the top of it, lifting it off the ground.

"Huh? Wait! What're you—" the sphere squawked, waggling its handlebars. "What're you doing? I was fine right there, right where I was, great, actually, um—where're you taking me?"

Zim pushed his way back into Dib's room and hurried over to the window, gritting his teeth to keep from dropping the sphere, whose struggles were growing increasingly frantic.

"Look, I don't even know who you are! Did that human tell you to—?" The sphere's optic shields pulled back, leaving its eye wide. "Oh! Oh, this is… I know what this is, you're kidnapping me! I'm being kidnapped! I…" The sphere darted its optic back and forth before coming to rest on the sleeping form of Dib. "HEY! OI! Look over here! HELP!"

The round window was one of those stupid ones that swiveled on an axis in the center, so even when opened all the way the middle of the opening was blocked and there was no way a sphere only slightly smaller than the diameter of the window would fit through. Zim dropped the sphere to the floor and set about removing the window from its frame.

"There's someone in here!" the sphere continued to yell at Dib, its voice going up several pitches. "In here, there's some random bloke in your room, mate, and he's trying to confiscate me without your permission, and, apparently, knowledge, because you're still asleep! I know humans love their sleep and all but—look, you need to wake up! Just wake up! Now! Help me!"

Zim clenched and unclenched his left fist as he worked, antennae erect and poised to pick up the slightest sound or movement from where Dib was sleeping. Dib muttered something; Zim glanced over and saw the human's eyelids flicker. They needed to get out of here now. Why wasn't this working?!

At last the clasps on the window popped open and the circular pane spun around, fell out through the opening, and shattered in the grass two floors below. Zim picked up the annoying sphere and attempted to shove it through the window as well, but the robot spread its handlebars wide and locked them into place so it wouldn't fit through the hole.

"MATE! HEY! DIB! DIB! HELP!" the sphere screamed.

"Dib! Make your stupid robots shut up!" a female voice shouted from outside the room. At her words Dib's eyes flew open and Zim knew he had only milliseconds before he was discovered. He twisted the sphere over and pushed it out the window handlebars-first, tearing streaks in the paint of the window's frame. Zim dropped the sphere before diving through the window himself.

MiniMoose darted up to catch him about halfway down and he hit the robot with a jolt in his abdomen, sliding off to land in the yard on his feet. He ran into the shadows just before Dib appeared at the window and looked down in complete confusion. The human vanished seconds afterward.

"What are you trying to gain from kidnapping me, anyway, hey?" someone asked, and Zim looked toward the voice. GIR was standing nearby, his metal hands clasped over the blue-eyed sphere. The sphere's optic had shrunk to a blue point and was whipping around in a panic. "I am a master hacker, true, true, but- but you can't make me hack anything! I won't cooperate! I won't! Haha! That's what you get for grabbing me and throwing me out a window! Yes, haha! Nice catch, though, I really should, erm, thank you for that." He directed this last part toward GIR. "So, thank you! But I still won't cooperate, because no one would've had to catch me if I hadn't been kidnapped and thrown out a window!"
"C'mon, GIR, we're getting out of here!" Zim said, training his gaze on the window he had used as an entry and escape route to the human's room, ignoring the sphere's ramblings. It was only a matter of seconds before Dib realized the sphere was missing and, stupid as the human was, he'd put the missing robot and broken window together and figure out what had happened. There was no chance of making off with the second sphere too, now. The biomechanical legs erupted from Zim's PAK again and he plunged down the street, balanced high up on the appendages' four spindly tips. GIR ran after him, still gripping the sphere, and MiniMoose raced after them through the air.

"WHEEEE-HOOOO!" GIR cheered.

"How are you doing that?" the sphere spluttered at the sight of Zim's PAK legs. His voice hiccuped with every jolting step that GIR took. "Can *all* humans do that? Then why didn't—wait, are those things coming out of your backpack? Where did you get that? And where'd you get this robot, too, the one that caught me? What kind of robot *is* it, anyway, I mean—Oh, better question, better question, where are you taking me? Should've asked that earlier, as there are definitely one or two places I do *not* want to go and if you're taking me to one of them than I should like to know about it beforehand and—Can you even hear me? Slow *down*, would you? No, seriously, could you- could you slow down? For a bit! Where are we *going*?"

They needed to run faster. Zim reached down, grabbed the single antennae sprouting from GIR's head, and hauled him up to strangled sounds of surprise from the captive sphere. Once he had hold of GIR, Zim put on a burst of speed and in less than a minute stumbled onto the walkway of his own house. The PAK legs snapped away again and he dropped GIR, ran forward, and nearly fell through his front door.

"Welcome home, Son!" the Roboparents chorused, peeking from their rooms and waving despite Zim having tried countless times to program them not to do that when there were no humans around. MiniMoose zipped inside as well and GIR trotted in with the sphere. Zim slammed the door behind the four of them, locked and bolted it, and made sure to raise the security around the base to its highest settings.

"I'm gonna play with the robo-ball!" GIR announced. Seeing as GIR's version of "playing" with something was usually another term for "breaking" it, Zim quickly took the robotic sphere out of GIR's hands and carried it over to the elevator that opened under the end table by the wall.

The metal plates that made up the sphere's casing shifted as if it was contracting in on itself. "Really, I- I dunno what you think you're gonna do with me," it said. "You want me to hack something, I'm sure. I won't do it! So just… take me back, will you. Because I won't cooperate! No matter what! Oh. Unless… well, ah, there is the small matter of torture, isn't there. Always that avenue you could, um, go down, if you… so desired. But I will tell you, that that avenue, of TORTURE, is the- the avenue of DARKNESS. And EVIL. And there's no turning back from that, is there! Moral corruption, corruption of morals, all that, so, amazing suggestion here, how about you just y'know, not torture me! It's win-win! Win for me because I don't get tortured, win for you because you won't be on the Avenue of Darkness. Terrible place. Just. Terrible, really."

As the sphere ranted, Zim stepped out of the elevator into his base and dropped the robot none too gently on top of a nearby console. He wished he could have grabbed both spheres, but there just hadn't been time. He'd just have to settle for this one, examine it, and maybe take it apart to see what kind of 'advanced technology' the Dib-human was so sure had been installed in it.

"There's someone at the door!" a voice said suddenly, causing the sphere to shiver in fear.

Zim winced. He thought he had a pretty good idea of just who was paying him a visit.
Dib knew what had happened the second he opened his bedroom door and saw that Wheatley was missing. The little core had been stolen and spirited out the window, right under Dib's nose. He still didn't understand how that had happened. He was an extremely light sleeper.

But he did know that Zim had been inside his house under cover of darkness. Who else would have broken in and taken a core? And why hadn't his dad's security system gone off? Man, that thing was useless.

Dib got dressed quickly, already out the front door before he had even put his boot on all the way. At last he wedged it all the way onto his foot and took off running down the street, not caring that it was the middle of the night. Wheatley and his captor (or maybe captors) were long gone, though Dib didn't need them to know exactly where Zim's house stood. His feet took him there almost automatically.

When he reached the alien's front lawn he paused, heart thumping, and stared apprehensively at the four humongous lawn gnomes standing guard on either side of the walkway. To heck with it. He jumped onto the walkway and sprinted to the door, hammering on it with his fist. None of the gnomes moved and Dib relaxed slightly; the security grid must still be broken.

After several moments the purple door cracked open to reveal Zim in his human disguise, glaring. "What do you want now, Dib?" he snapped.

Dib fixed him with a scowl. "My robot back."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Good-bye, worm child," Zim closed the door again in Dib's face. His next yell was muffled and not directed to Dib. "GIR! Something's still wrong with the gnome field! What did you do to it?"

"Zim!" Dib raised his voice. "I'm not leaving without Wheatley! I know you took him! And I'm not going to forget that you broke into my house!"

"LIES! I did no such thing!" Zim shouted back. "Begone with you before I put my gnomes on your scent! They're deadly!"

"Your lawn gnomes are broken, Zim," Dib deadpanned.

Zim's stupid cackling could be heard right through the door. "Oh... sad, pathetic Dib. I think you'll find the lawn gnomes are perfectly all right and very much ALIVE!" The cackling broke into maniacal laughter. There was absolutely no change in the unmoving lawn gnomes and Zim's laughter faded away. "Ack, I thought that fixed them... GIR, I'm never leaving you in charge of the gnome controls again. EVER."

Dib sighed, leaning against the gross alien door. "Zim, just give me back the robot."

"No," Zim said.

"Yes."

"NO!"

"Give him back!"

"FINDERS KEEPERS!"

It was such an immature and unexpected thing to say that Dib stared at the door, unsure for a
moment as to how to respond. "You didn't find him, you stole him!"

"Finders keepers and losers weepers. Victory for ZIM!"

Dib smacked himself in the face. "Man, Zim, how old are you, five? ...Ow."

"I don't have to listen to you, Dibworm," Zim taunted from inside the house. "My gnome field may not be operational right now but you will still never manage to break into my fortress!"

Dib took in the strange, slanted purple-and-green building, with its odd assortment of gnomes, plastic flamingoes, puffer fish and 'I love Earth' signs on the lawn. "'Fortress'?

"Yes. Now go away."

Dib gave one last futile pound on the door before backing up and scrutinizing the house from top to bottom. He should've known better than to come asking Zim for the core back. He'd have to go about this with the usual method—figuring out a way of breaking into the alien's underground base. And with the gnome field out of commission, what better time to do it?

Giving the house one last disparaging look, he turned and headed back toward his own home to gather supplies.

Chapter End Notes

Image by BabyCharmander at http://blazingcoral.deviantart.com/art/Now-You-re-Thinking-with-Real-Science-Banner-7-490298609
The room was in complete darkness save for a scattering of pulsing red and purple lights, as well as the soft blue glow of Wheatley's own optic.

That strange, mutated person with the retractable metal spider legs—the one who had captured him, tossed him out of a window, and brought him to this strange place—had left a while ago and plunged the room into the dark gloom that currently permeated it. Wheatley had been left utterly alone, sitting helplessly atop some sort of computer console. He had to resist shifting his lower handle the tiniest bit lest he topple off and crash to the floor.

He could turn on his flashlight, he mused. But he couldn't shake the nagging thought that he would not like what he saw. He hadn't gotten a good look at the room before the lights had been switched off, but just the feeling it gave him... almost like an aura... it was like a laboratory. It- it was too much like—it reminded him of That Place. And maybe it was. Who could tell? They had gone underground, after all. He was sitting alone in an underground laboratory.

At least, in the dark, he couldn't see anything that might confirm his worst fears.

"And I'm not being tortured!" he said aloud, his accent spiked with hysterical optimism as it echoed through the room. "That's, ah, that's a plus! One thing I don't have to worry about, definitely." He forced himself to give a definitive nod. "Of course, I guess I'm going to be stuck down here for a good while, wherever, y'know, wherever 'here' is." He simulated a gulp and shifted his panels. "And there is also the small matter of not knowing why I was kidnapped. He probably wants me to hack something. I should make something up, get my story straight. Right. When that spider bloke comes back, I'll tell him- I'll tell him that I'm no good at hacking, not at all. And, and I'm a bomb! Or, I'm powered by a bomb. Or, no, I've got a bomb inside me... Doesn't affect me much at all, it's just sort of there. And if I'm not brought back to that human's house, it'll go off. KABOOM! Say goodbye to your nice little lab, mate. And yourself. 'Cos when this bomb goes off, there'll be nothing left! All gone, in a flash, you included, all because you didn't bring me back. Shame. Yes. That's what I'll say. As- as soon as he comes back." Wheatley blinked a few times, hunching down in his casing and flicking his optic from side to side.
"I see you," a small, high-pitched voice said.

"AAAAUUUGGGHHH!" Wheatley gave a shrill scream and his vision flashed, his optic glitching horribly as sheer panic flooded his systems. The simple phrase was familiar although the voice was not, and for a moment he saw it: sleek, starkly white, a blood-red beam of light glaring from its eye—he'd never been especially afraid of turrets, as they only attacked test subjects and other humans, but they were an extension of Her, and their presence could only mean that he was back There, he was back in That Place, and it was only a matter of time before… before…

"Hi!" A glowing pair of circular, teal eyes appeared next to Wheatley and stared unblinkingly at him. Wheatley instantly switched on his flashlight and craned his optic around to stare the thing in the face.

It wasn't a turret. It was the little robot that had caught him earlier and then carried him here.

"Ohh. It's you." Relief was evident in Wheatley's voice and he dipped his optic, the bright light spilling across the surrounding consoles and onto the floor. "The bloody strange robot with two eyes. Sorry about that. I thought you were… er, never mind. Forget I said anything. Look, mate, d'you think you could get me outta here?"

"I wanna play," the robot said. "We gonna make pancakes, 'kaaay?"

"I—pancakes?" Wheatley blinked and looked back up. "What are—WHOA HEY HOLD ON—" The other robot grabbed hold of his upper handle and yanked him off the console, causing the dark room to spin; he ran forward, swinging Wheatley back and forth haphazardly. Nausea rose up in Wheatley's processor and he flinched. How was it even possible that he could feel nauseated? What had those bloody scientists been thinking when they'd programmed him with this useless stuff?

"I'm GIR!" the robot chirped as he carried Wheatley into a circular lift, grinning broadly. "Who're you?!"

"Wheatley," he gasped. His optic shifted in and out of focus as it tried to readjust itself. The lift rose upward and when it stopped GIR burst out into the next room, still gripping Wheatley's handle. Up here the house was brightly-lit. GIR darted into an adjacent room that contained a fridge, an oven, and other kitchen-y things, so Wheatley assumed it was a kitchen. Although there was a toilet against the far wall, which seemed a bit odd.

GIR plopped Wheatley down on the counter next to the fridge with a clunk and flung the fridge open. "PANCAKES!"

Wheatley cringed.

GIR reached into the fridge, pulled out an open jug of milk that looked like it had been in there for months, and slammed down it next to Wheatley. "You ever made pancakes 'afore?"

"…No," Wheatley replied, blinking in an effort to wipe away the droplets of congealed milk that had splashed onto his optic. "I literally have no idea what pancakes are—Wait…" He performed a quick search of his database for the word, pulling up the result that "pancakes" were flat, sweet, pastry things that humans liked to make. They'd slap a pat of butter on top and then drown the entire mess in sticky maple syrup. He shook his inner casing. "What? Why would you want to make one o' those? They seem… I dunno, pointless. Maybe that's just me as a robot speaking, since I don't need to eat, and all human food seems pretty much pointless to me—not so much to humans, though, seeing as they live off the stuff—What are you planning on doing with pancakes?"
"Ya EAT 'em!" GIR said. He grabbed an enormous bag of flour from a cabinet and dropped it on another counter, sending up a white cloud that drifted over everything in a five-foot radius and clung there in a powdery film. "Pancakes're good."

"Okay, not arguing against that," Wheatley said. "Humans love them, obviously. Point is, are you actually planning on eating them? Hate to, um, disappoint you, mate, but… you're a robot. Like me. Well, like me, only with appendages. And I'm pretty sure eating is physically impossible when you haven't got a—Well, all right, so you do have a mouth, a big one if I'm honest, but I really doubt you've got a stomach. Also, do you really have taste sensors? That sounds about as useful as my bloody artificial nervous system. Not useful at all, in case you didn't pick up on what I was saying, there."

While Wheatley talked, GIR reached into another cupboard and pulled out two crumpled, off-white, dirty papery things. He shook them both out so that they stood up relatively straight and mushed one on top of Wheatley's chassis, then put the other on his own head. "I made two chef hats!" GIR exclaimed, going back to the cupboard and pulling out a ridiculously large bowl. "One of 'em's for Zim but he don't wear his much. So I GAVE IT TO YOU!"

Wheatley flinched again, craning his optic to see the hat standing on his casing. "Oh! Er. Thanks."

GIR, giving a happy little hum, picked up the bag of flour, ripped open a hole in the top, and overturned the entire thing into the massive bowl. The sheer amount of flour that billowed into the air blinded Wheatley for a second, despite his attempts to shield his eye with his optic plates, and clogged every scratch, dent, and hole in his casing. His systems retched, jerking as his vocal synthesizer involuntarily simulated hacking and coughing. When the air cleared he watched, his vision still fogged by the flour covering his optic, as GIR threw five eggs (shell and all) into the bowl as well. As each egg hit it sent up another little puff of flour. Finally, GIR grabbed the milk jug and poured its entire contents onto the flour and egg mixture. He grabbed a wooden spoon and jabbed the end of that in as well—then he picked up the entire bowl, staggering a bit from the weight, and brought it over to where Wheatley was sitting. He nudged Wheatley out of the way with his elbow and slapped the bowl on the counter, beaming. "Your turn!"

Wheatley eyed the bowl. "My turn for what? I can't exactly stir that, can I?"

The other robot frowned, then brightened up again. "Kay! I'll do it!" He climbed up onto the counter as well, shoving the bowl over to make room, which in turn pushed Wheatley to the edge of the counter and left about an inch of him hanging over empty space. GIR then began stabbing the spoon into the botched pancake mixture with vigorous enthusiasm. Milk, egg, and flour sloshed out and spattered over Wheatley, adding more gunk to his casing, though this time he was quick enough to slam his optic shields closed and avoid getting any more mess in his eye.

"Is all this really necessary?" he spluttered as yet more batter splashed onto him. "What do I even need to be here for? All you did was sit me on the counter and give me a hat!"

"GIR? What are you doing?"

Wheatley squinted at the source of the new, though familiar, voice. A boy with sickly yellowish-green skin and greased black hair sauntered into the room. He took one look at the batter-covered robots and groaned.

"We're makin' pancakes!" GIR enthused. The boy walked over, picking Wheatley up and holding him out at arm's-length as if he really might explode. Globs of stuff dribbled down off him and spattered onto the floor.
"Ech… GIR, I need this for… science-y things. It's not a toy! I need to know what technology humans are capable of! Do you understand me?"

He didn't wait for GIR to reply, instead carting off the hapless Wheatley back to his dark underground lair.

"Hello? Wheatley? Are you there?"

Dib pressed a few buttons on his wrist communicator and held it up to his ear, then spoke to it again. "Wheatley! Can you hear me?"

There was no answer. Dib hmphed, switching off the communication. Apparently, trying to contact Wheatley using the serial number he'd overheard the core recite just wouldn't work. Maybe he'd entered it in wrong. 0614, right? Yeah, he was sure that was it. But there was no reply.

Dib had arrived back at his house with no memory of making the journey. The building was still and silent, dark except for the light that he had inadvertently left on in his bedroom. He pushed through his front door and ran upstairs through the dim house to his room, dashing in and hurrying to his closet.

"Gonna go back to space," the Space Core, still sitting in the hallway, gurgled. "Need a rocketship. Need a space suit. Flying in my space suit."

Dib wheeled around and darted into the hallway again, grabbing the core and dragging it back into his room. He opened his closet via the hand-scanner mounted on the wall and snatched a familiar black garment suspended on a wire coat hanger just inside, tossing it onto his bed. He then placed the Space Core on top of one of the shelves in the closet.

"IS THIS AN ELEVATOR TO SPACE?" the core asked excitedly.

"No," Dib replied. "...Sorry about this." He closed the closet doors again and turned away at the satisfying click of the electronic lock engaging.

"Can't wait for SPACE!" the core's muffled voice said. Dib sighed. Locking him up wasn't being cruel, right? He wouldn't put it past Zim to come back for the other core, and Dib could do without having two robots to rescue.

He changed quickly into the thin stealth suit he had removed from the closet and did a quick routine check of its belt and pockets to make sure he had everything he might need. Flashlight, check. Pocket-size grappling hook, check. Camera and audio recorder—just in case—check. Granola bar for if he got hungry, check. Wrist communicator… Dib tapped the face of his watch with one finger. Check. Just two more things to get. He kneeled down, digging under his bed for a moment before finally pulling out his old X-scope. He gave it an experimental flick on and off. It seemed to still be in good working condition, albeit with several dings and scratches on the casing and lenses. Dib fitted the scope over his head and flipped the visor over the back so it wouldn't interfere with his vision until he needed it.

The last item was perhaps the most important and was what would gain him entry to Zim's house. It was also out in the garage. Dib paused and surveyed the room before leaving. Anything else he needed?

"I wish I had night-vision goggles," he muttered. He used to have a pair, actually, but then there had been that long-ago incident with the leprechaun and that crazed myna bird…
Shuddering, he switched off the light in his room and headed down to the garage to find the last thing he needed before he was ready for a reconnaissance/rescue mission.

"So, eh, what are you, anyways?" Zim held the metal sphere over his head, scrutinizing the bottom of it through squinted eyes. He had removed his disguise before coming down and his antennae twitched at the faint smell of the egg and milk mixture that still covered the stolen robot, despite his best attempts to clean it off with wet wipes.

"Personality core!" the sphere said, looking down at him and waving both of its handles frantically. "Er, construct. Personality construct! But you won't get anything else out of me! What do you want, anyway? The secrets of Aperture? Don't know any! Sorry mate, you've got the wrong core!"

Zim lowered the core and stared into its optic. "What is Aperture? I've heard that name before, I think."

"...Oh." The core blinked and looked away. "It's, um, it's a... place. A place you do not need to know about, trust me."

Zim narrowed his eyes, fingers digging into the metal casing of the core. "What place? Tell me!"

The core shivered and pulled into its casing as far as it could like a filthy Earth turtle. "N-no—"

"FOOLISH PERSONALITY CONSTRUCT! TELL ZIM!"

The core quailed. "I- I'm not foolish, bit un- uncalled for—" it said desperately.

Zim took hold of the edges of the core's side openings in an iron grip and shook the thing vigorously. The core yelped, its optic jerking up and down with each movement and clanging against its outer casing.

"St- stop i—" The core's speech jittered, its speech functions apparently scattered as it tried and failed to regain equilibrium. "STOP! IT!" Its optic flared brilliant blue.

Zim halted the motion and held the core steadily out in front of him. "Well? What is Aperture?"

The core's voice synthesizer produced gasping sounds as its optic slowly performed a 360 turn, focusing and refocusing. Finally it rested on Zim, shrank in diameter, and the optic plates narrowed. "What was that about?"

"Tell me what Aperture is!" Zim glared at the core, which "glared" right back. Then it shivered and its gaze darted away again.

"Science facility," the core mumbled. "It's a science facility, all right? Coulda looked that up online, there's plenty of search results for it. I know that much. Didn't have to go shaking me around like a—like a bloody maraca."

Zim set the core down on a worktable. "Aperture, a science facility? As if the filthy humans know anything about science!"

The core gave a light, nervous chuckle. "True, true, although some humans did make me, as well as, well, others, so—wait, what d'you mean—?"

"All right, little... core. Let's see what all you're capable of." Zim leaned close to the core and examined it from all angles.
"Er, nothing personal," the core said slowly, "but what you said just then—erm, earlier—it sort of, well, it sort of implied that you are in fact... not human."

"Eh? Of course I'm human!" Zim rebuked, getting up to retrieve something.

"Oh. Well... good." The core nodded its optic. "I should point out, though, that you do have some slight... er, *antennae*, growing, just there, right on top of your head. Sorry. Also, again, sorry, can't help but notice, but you don't actually have any ears! Not *entirely* sure how you can even hear me right now."

"It's nothing but a disgusting skin condition," Zim brushed the accusation aside like he was brushing away a fly and continued searching until he found exactly what he was looking for.

The core's optic widened, horrified. "Humans can have skin conditions that— that make them look like that?" It shuddered, staring at Zim in some sort of appalled awe. "I... well, you've been through a lot, 'aven't you? And I imagine my criticisms did not help in the slightest. Sorry about that, I suppose, really sort of insensitive... Look, maybe we can just—what're you gonna do with that?"

Zim had raised the object he'd found—a multipurpose Irken tool about the size of a pen, complete with screwdriver, knife, laser-cutter, welding tool, and anything else he might need. He looked at the core with a mostly neutral expression that bordered on a leer. "I need to figure out what you're capable of!"

The core's bright blue optic shrunk to a pinpoint, fixed on the tool. "You're not gonna— you wouldn't."

The sneer that had been threatening to break out on Zim's face finally split it. "I *would*. You're a friend of the Dib-human's, no?" He tapped the tool against his palm. "Any 'friend' of the *Dib* is—"

"Did I say we were friends?" the core piped up instantly. "I don't remember saying that! In fact, I distinctly remember not saying that. We're- we're acquaintances. At most. Not even that. Granted, he did save me from space—wait, wait, did I ever thank him for that? I didn't, did I. You know what? Doesn't matter! Doesn't matter in the slightest, because, because we're not—"

Zim pointed the device at one of the joints holding the core's lower handle on and started to twist it, grimacing with the effort. It was really stuck on there. The core's panicked voice hiked up a notch.

"No need to do this! Really! No need to associate me with him, at all! We're not frie—"

Zim received a sharp, painful smack on his hand and the device flew from his grasp. He jerked his head up, staring around in shock. Apart from himself and the core, the room was empty. "Huh—?"

The air near Zim shifted slightly; the artificial light put off by the glaring bulbs overhead bent and refracted oddly around a human-shaped figure. Zim stumbled away from the apparition and before his eyes the core he'd been about to dismantle levitated up into the air.

"What—hey—what's got me?!" the core cried. The area around its upper handle was smeared and blurred. The core hovered off the ground, spinning around and heading quickly toward the exit to the lab. "I can't see what's—it's a GHOST! A bloody *ghost's* got me! DO SOMETHING!"

Zim's PAK legs sprang out at his silent command, arcing around his body and firing a beam of scorching yellow light at the anomaly. The core—or some invisible force holding the core—dodged, rolling to the side. There was a yell that sounded somewhat familiar. Whatever was holding the core scrambled up again and took off at a sprint toward the elevator. Zim rose up on his PAK legs and scrambled forward, blocking the elevator entrance just before the blurry thing made it through. The
shimmering image skidded to a halt.

"Reveal yourself!" Zim spat. The thing paused for only a second, and then it produced a flashlight that shone a glaring beam straight into Zim's eyes. "AAHH!" He reeled, staggering to the side. The figure stowed the flashlight away, slid under Zim's PAK legs, and somersaulted into the elevator.

"This is good! This is good!" the core yelled. "I like where this is going!"

"Computer, do not let them get up there!" Zim shouted. The elevator doors slid closed anyway and Zim's voice hiked a pitch in fury. "COMPUTER!"

"Agh... Sorry, Zim," the Computer said, its voice strained. "I had to put all of the elevators on manual operation because... well, maybe you should get up here."

"Manual?!" Zim demanded in disbelief, slapping his forehead. "Why in Irk would you do that? You're as bad as GIR!"

The Computer made a literal growling sound. "First of all, thanks a lot. Second, get up here."

The whatever-it-was carrying Wheatley rode the lift in absolute silence until they arrived at the surface once more, climbing out through an exit that had been hidden under a table. Up here, everything was chaos. Some sort of acid-green substance coated the ceiling—Well, not the ceiling, Wheatley realized; it was an elaborate setup of wires and cables twining together and threading up into the structure of the house. The substance coating the wires, whatever it was, had left them in a rusted, melted, goopy mess. GIR was in the kitchen, still enthusiastically attempting to make pancakes. As Wheatley and his new captor rushed by he looked up.

"Hi, Mary!" he said. He then picked up the entire bowl of pancake batter and flung the contents at them.

"NYAH!" someone cried. The air around Wheatley fizzled and solidified into a black figure that was frantically trying to wipe the batter off without dropping him.

"Oh! It's you!" Wheatley said in complete surprise, finally know exactly who was holding him. It was none other than Dib, dressed in some sort of black suit that covered him from head to toe. "Am I glad to see you! I think that bloke back there with the mechanical legs was gonna take me apart!"

"He was," Dib said. Most of his face was covered by a black mask but Wheatley saw his eyes dart over to the front door. "We've gotta get out of here!" He hurried forward, picking up a large metal receptacle that was sitting on the floor and slinging it onto his back. Attached to the container was a hose that dripped the same green stuff that was all over the ceiling.

Dib took off running toward the exit, though he was obviously encumbered by Wheatley and the weight of that thing on his back. A long metal arm descended from the vandalized ceiling and moved sluggishly to block their way. Wheatley flinched, remembering all too well the robotic arms that were under Her command. Dib ducked to the side and continued running.

The decrepit arm gave a flick; one drop of whatever substance Dib had used to handicap the boss computer flew off, landing on Wheatley's casing just to the side of his optic.

He screamed.

The green glob ate through the outer layer of his casing, leaving a stain of dark reddish-brown rust. He wasn't even supposed to be able to rust. Dib looked down at him in alarm and Wheatley
attempted a smile, fighting the urge to cry out. "Don't—ah, don't worry about ol' Wheatley, mate, just… keep running. That's… fantastic."

Dib sprinted to the exit and at the same time wiped the green glob away with a gloved finger. He didn't stop running, not even when they'd reached the walkway, then the road. It was still crippling dark out. Must've been the middle of the night.

"Don't worry, I've got it!" Wheatley said. He clicked on his flashlight and the road was suddenly brightly illuminated.

"Zim'll know where we are!" Dib said, but he didn't ask for the light to be turned out.

As they ran a robotic purple moose zipped up to them, circled, went "Nyeh!" or something of the sort, and flew off again.

"MiniMoose," Dib panted, his grip on Wheatley tightening. He was still full-out sprinting and looked like he might just collapse at any moment.

"Keep going! Just keep running!" Wheatley shouted to keep up Dib's morale. There wasn't much else he could do. "What's a MiniMoose?"

Down the road behind them came the sound of skittering metal, like a mechanical spider was chasing after them. Dib staggered off the road, plunged between two houses, and continued running on the next street.

"Turn off the light!" he said. Wheatley obediently switched off the flashlight and just hung there, utterly useless.

"Look, Dib, mate," he said. "Sorry for what I said back there, in case you- you heard that. You probably did. About us not being, y'know, friends. I didn't actually mean it. I thought I was gonna be tortured… You understand, don't you?"

"'S fine," Dib forced out. His pace had slowed a lot and he grimaced, pushing to run faster.

"Oh! And, also, I should thank you! For getting me out of space!" Wheatley said, brightening. "And saving me from getting taken apart by that maniac back there, too, even better. So… where're we going? This isn't the way back to your house, is it?"

Dib's sprint had become nothing more than a hopping sort of jog. "We're not—going to my house," he gasped. "Zim's still—following."

Sure enough, the sounds of shouts and rattling metal were still behind them.

"So where are we going, then?" Wheatley demanded.

"Mystical Hill," Dib replied.

Wheatley wasn't entirely sure why Dib would want to go there of all places, but Dib offered no explanation and Wheatley made no comment about it. Instead he talked about his brief capture, like how bloody terrible it had been to be thrown out of a window and how bizarre GIR's pancake-making fiasco had been.

At last they reached the hill. Dib was no longer running and instead he just trudged up the path winding to its zenith. When they finally reached the top he really did collapse, sinking to his knees and setting Wheatley down before falling face-first into the grass.
"At least it's a nice night," Wheatley put in after a moment. Dib sat up, pulling off the mask that partially obscured his face and wiping sweat from his brow with the side of his thumb.

"Yeah," he said.

The spider bloke, Zim, seemed to have lost them. The only sounds were the gentle skreet, skreet of creatures that Wheatley couldn't identify, though Dib seemed to think they were harmless enough.

"So what's that stuff you've got in that thing on your back?" Wheatley asked.

Dib glanced at it over his shoulder. "Something Dad made. It melts and rusts metal and machinery almost instantly, except for whatever metal the container's made of." He rapped on it with the back of his hand. "It's still too dangerous to try to sell but I figured it might be my only chance of getting you out of there." His eyes drifted to his black suit, now covered in batter just like Wheatley was, and he pulled a grimace. "That stupid robot! I hope he hasn't ruined my stealth suit. Anyway, time to get to work."

The boy reached over and pulled what looked like a spelldrive to him. Wheatley blinked. It was a spelldrive. He remembered that they had left them behind earlier that day.

"I'm going to try to activate some of those attack spells," Dib said. "If Zim catches up to us tonight we'll be ready. If he doesn't, he won't come after us with spider legs in broad daylight, anyway."

"Bet you wish you had some of those, hey?" Wheatley said, his lower optic shutter lifting in a slight grin. He knew he sort of wished he had spider legs like that. Or any legs at all, really.

Dib opened the spelldrive and tried to access the spells. He stared, dumbfounded. "The powerpoints are gone," he said.

"What?!" Wheatley said. "But I got them for you! D'you mean the spelldrive mainframe didn't actually fix them? That lying—"

"Wait, hold on," Dib said. He picked up the black cable, still resting where he had left it, and plugged one end into the spelldrive and the other into Wheatley's back port. After a second he smiled in delight. "There! They're back! I guess since it's supposed to be empty, it just needs a core to be plugged into it in order to use the spells—sort of stupid, but... No, wait, this isn't the right spelldrive. This isn't the one with the attack spells. It's the one with teleportation and stuff—Here, let's try the other one."

"Teleportation sounds good, if that spider bloke really does catch up to us," Wheatley put in.

The boy shook his head. "No, we have no way of knowing where it might send us. What if we end up somewhere worse than here?"

"I dunno, I'd say the odds of us ending up somewhere better are pretty high, considering..."

"DIB!" someone shouted. Dib whipped around. The spider bloke, Zim, was running up the hill on those metal legs, looking absolutely livid. "You've kidnapped what I've rightfully stolen!"

Dib hopped to his feet, putting his back to the spelldrive and Wheatley as if to block them from view. "I don't know how you found us here, Zim, but as long as I'm standing you're not gonna get your filthy hands on—!"

"Teleportation it is!" Wheatley announced, and he selected it before anything else could happen.
Dib only had time to grab his handle, fixing him with a horrified look and choking out, "No, wait —!" before the spelldrive screen flashed, there was a rushing sound that nearly overloaded Wheatley's aural receptors, and their surroundings disappeared.

Dib coughed and retched, standing up and rubbing at his eyes. Smoke from the spell clogged the back of his throat.

Fury at Wheatley twisted his stomach into a violent knot. Of all the stupid—He stopped himself, opening his stinging eyes and slowly looking around at where they had ended up.

He didn't recognize it at all.

They were in a wide, dome-like room surrounded by numerous panels that made up strange geometric patterns. The room was nearly bare, though the panels could have been concealing a wider space, and there was only one prominent object to be seen—directly in the center, drawing all possible attention to itself, there was a giant, gleaming, white and black, bulky thing that hung suspended from the ceiling.

Out of the corner of his eye Dib saw Wheatley, still plugged into the spelldrive, shrink into his casing and curl his handles in toward his face. The core's voice became very, very small. "Ohno."

The colossal monstrosity on the ceiling, as if at his words, rotated around in its ceiling mount and faced the two of them. The front of it was somewhat like a sizable curved rectangle with a single, cold, yellow light in the center that stared down at them. An optic, Dib thought, his body paralyzed with shock. He found to his surprise that this thing, whatever it was, filled him with a terrible unease.

"Oh," a feminine voice said.

The sound echoed across the room, seemingly emanating from everywhere at once, though Dib recognized immediately that it had originated from the chilling creature—if you could call it a creature—in front of him.

"Well. This is unexpected."
Chapter End Notes

Chapter banner by BabyCharmander at http://blazingcoral.deviantart.com/art/Now-You-re-Thinking-with-Real-Science-Banner-8-490429761

Illustration by Jaywings at https://www.deviantart.com/jayfeather-wings/art/Well-This-is-unexpected-705815053
"Hide me!" Wheatley squeaked from the floor. "Don't let Her see me! All right? She cannot see me, that is of the utmost importance! Just- just stand in front of me, there, like that, like you're doing, and, and I'll try to think of a way out of this—maybe teleportation again? Nonono your drive's recharging! It can't be still recharging it can't be—"

The monstrous thing moved its head closer to the pair and peered at them with that cold, glaring, yellow optic. "Hm... A human I've never seen before, and the metal ball I'd hoped to never see again, somehow both managing to break into my Facility without being detected. I have to say, I'm intrigued."

"You're both covered in pastry batter, by the way, and I don't appreciate it dripping on my floor."

"She's spotted me," Wheatley whimpered. "Quick, pick me up, pick me up—!"

Dib took Wheatley by the upper handle, pulled the cable out of his back port, and hoisted the core into his arms. He looked up at the enormous machine over his head. "What are you? Where are we?"

It didn't reply; instead, the crescent-shaped head shifted to focus its gaze on Wheatley.

"Oh, you've found one that talks this time," it said. "Congratulations."

"Er, thank you," Wheatley replied. His voice shook slightly.

"What are you?" Dib asked again, taking in the machine with wide, awed eyes.

The feminine-sounding machine rose to look Dib in the eye. "I should hope the answer to that question is exceedingly obvious."

"I guess you're some sort of AI, too?" Dib said, glancing down at Wheatley again. The poor little robot looked frightened to death. Based on his reaction to their surroundings, and the fact that they had teleported here while he was plugged in, Dib could only guess that they had arrived in the very place that Wheatley had come from. The very place to which he had been terrified to return—
"'Some sort of AI', yes. You deserve a medal for figuring that out," the computer said. She fixed Wheatley with a frown. "It seems the metal ball in your noodly arms hasn't told you about me. I can only imagine what else he may have neglected to tell you."

"Nothing!" Wheatley said at once. "Oh, what? I'm not hiding anything, honest, not one thing." He tilted his faceplate to look up at Dib. "Why would I've left anything out? I told you everything, mate, everything that happened at the facility. No need to listen to Her. Did I mention she lies a lot? Everything that spews out of her vocal processor is a lie, if I'm honest."

Dib glanced uncertainly back and forth between the two AIs. "You didn't say anything about a giant computer hanging from the ceiling," he muttered to Wheatley. Then he raised his voice. "So... you two know each other?" he asked, wishing he had a clue as to what was going on here.

"We met once, a year ago," the AI said offhandedly. "I'm surprised his limited cognitive abilities even provided him with enough foolhardy courage to come crawling back here. Although, by the look of him, it appears they haven't."

Wheatley choked out a nervous laugh that bordered on hysteria. "Heh, you're right! I didn't come here of my own accord, um, although I... would've. If I'd wanted to. The- the place looks great, by the way." He darted his optic around as if taking in the room. "Really great. Terrific, even."

The other AI looked around too. "Yes, it does look nice when not covered in rubble and surrounded by a ten-foot wall of fire, doesn't it?"

Although the thing wasn't looking at them, Wheatley shivered in Dib's arms at her words.

"Okay, I- I thought that might be brought up," he said, an obvious tremor in his voice now. "I'd like to—well, now that I'm here, I need to say... I'm sorry, about all that. Went a bit bonkers. Especially when it came to root vegetables and, er, you. That was not one of my best ideas. One of my worst, I'd say. Another bad idea: Core Transfer. That didn't quite work out well for any involved. That's pretty up there, too. And another one..."

The yellow optic had lowered during Wheatley's rambling and now stared at him, unwavering. When the core trailed off she pulled away again.

"Oh, that?" she said brightly. "That's all ancient history. You know, I'm not even angry about that old thing anymore."

Wheatley had cringed away. Now he looked back up at her, a small spark of hope in his optic. "You're not... What? ...Sincerely?"

The AI drifted upwards. "Oh, I may have said some things here and there. And perhaps, once, I did contemplate revenge against you. Now I've got a much better idea. Why not let bygones be bygones?"

A knot of unease formed in Dib's stomach and he took half a step backwards, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. He could almost feel the air crackling with tension. Something had happened here, something awful, and his heart grew heavy with dread despite the fact that there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. Wheatley, however, seemed to be relaxing.

"Agreed!" he said, his voice just a little bit more confident. "One hundred percent agreed! I—wow, I had no idea you'd accept my apology so- so quickly! Okay, so, idea, here. A good one this time. How about we just, you know, start over? Start completely over, wipe the slate clean! No animosity
whatevser. Just two happy AIs with no animosity between them to be seen. What do you think?"
He lifted his lower shutter in a shuddering smile.

"Perfect," the other AI said. "I believe your pet human would like to be brought up to speed on the
details first, however. Why don't you tell him all about the human you used to run around with?"

"...Oh." Wheatley's hopeful mood deflated like a popped balloon and his gaze shifted from side to
side. "That."

Dib swallowed, averting his eyes from the hulking AI to look down at Wheatley again. "What's she
talking about? What happened?"

"Oh, oh, it's nothing, it's just the test subject I was tellin' you about," Wheatley said in an undertone.
Dib remembered that Wheatley had mentioned one test subject trapped in the underground laboratory
—a test subject he wanted to save.

"The test subject that you nearly murdered," the female AI said.

Dib's head snapped up. "What?"

"That 'friend' of yours is no more your friend than a turret is. I hate to break it to you, but he just
happens to be a would-be cold-blooded killer. He didn't get the chance to do any actual cold-
blooded killing, but I assure you. The intention was there. The scrap heap you're holding is a
monster."

Once again, Dib glanced down at the small, limbless, helpless core clutched in his arms. "That
doesn't make any sense. How could he have—?"

"He wasn't in that pitiful body, of course, at the time. He had the means to kill a human and tried,
repeatedly, to do just that. I have the recordings right here. Don't believe me? Here, I'll put him on."

A sudden voice flooded the room—a familiar voice that shocked Dib to the marrow, and so loud that
he was forced to drop Wheatley and clap his hands over his ears with a cry. Wheatley made a painful
sound of protest as he hit the floor with a crack and rolled onto his side, but the noises were lost amid
the recording of the core's own enraged voice that blasted through the room.

"WHAT?! Are you still alive?! You have got to be kidding me! Well, I'm still in
control! AND I HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO FIX THIS PLACE!"

The tones reverberated around the panel-enclosed room for several seconds after the recording had
cut off. As the echoes faded, Dib slowly took his hands away from his ears and stared down at the
core on the floor. He made no move to pick his friend back up.

"So there you have it," the female AI said.

"It's not what it looks like!" Wheatley exclaimed. His handles were pulled into his face and his optic
had shrunk considerably. "Or sounds like! It's not either of 'em! She's lying, I told you, She lies!"

"That was your voice." Dib's voice was a croak. He looked back up at the computer hanging
overhead.

"You know it's only a matter of time before that core betrays you, too."

"I wouldn't!" Wheatley's voice rose in a wail that caused Dib to take a step back from him, looking at
him in alarm. The core had his glowing blue optic fixed on Dib's wide eyes. "I wouldn't! Look, mate,
you saved me from space! You saved me from that maniac with the bloody spider legs!"

"What." The female computer focused on Wheatley once again.

"Why would I turn on you? I already stabbed one human in the back—that is, metaphorically. I obviously don't have any arms to do any actual stabbing, and I didn't mean to, but I did it, and I can't fix that right now, I'll just have to find 'er and tell her I'm sorry later, but—I'm not gonna do it again! How could I, anyway? There's no way I'm goin' through the core transfer again—" He shuddered, his casing rattling. "So I can't betray you, anyway. See? We're friends, aren't we? So pick me up! Please! Friends pick each other up! Don't listen to Her. I dunno what She's up to, but She's probably trying to turn you against me. Just—please pick me up!"

Dib hesitated, but then he obliged. He wasn't entirely sure what all the core was talking about, but he was right—they were friends. Wheatley was pretty much the only friend he had. And he didn't have any concrete proof that the little robot had betrayed anyone. For all he knew, that one recording of his voice could have been taken completely out of context. Wheatley could have simply been quoting the television, or something, even. Taking hold of the core's handles, with many repeated, stumbling "thank you"s from said core, Dib held him close and looked up at the computer once again.

She seemed distracted from her previous warnings about Wheatley turning traitorous and changed the subject the moment she had their attention again.

"What were you saying about someone with spider legs?" she said, her gaze fixed on Wheatley.

"He was talking about Zim," Dib said. The odd head rose to meet his eye level and watched him steadily. "I had to rescue Wheatley from him. Zim's an alien, by the way."

The optic narrowed. "There is no evidence in all of Science to conclusively prove the existence of extraterrestrials."

Well, great, someone else who didn't believe him. Dib gritted his teeth. "Well, they do! And they've invaded the planet. Zim's an insectoid species from far outside our solar system. He's got green skin, no nose, and no ears—he says it's all part of a skin condition, but—"

"Hold on, what?" Wheatley demanded from Dib's arms. "The spider-bloke is an alien?"

Dib cast him a curious look. "Um, yeah. I kind of thought you'd figured that out."

"In that case, you vastly overestimated that idiot's intelligence," the female AI said.

"Aliens don't exist!" Wheatley persisted.

Dib furrowed his brow. "Neither do sentient talking computers, as far as my dad's concerned, but look at you two. Anyway, I have proof!" He reached into a pocket in the utility belt he was wearing and pulled out the camera he had brought, shifting Wheatley's weight over to one arm so he could control the camera with his other hand. The action of reaching into his pocket jostled the container he still wore on his back, causing a few green droplets to fall onto the ground. Wheatley shied away from it and then watched curiously as Dib turned the camera on and sifted through old pictures until he came across the one he wanted. "Here!"

He turned the camera the other way so the screen was facing toward the computer, who glided forward so she could peer at the tiny screen. It was a picture of Zim's house in all of its bizarre green and purple glory. An "I love Earth" sign was clearly visible on the front lawn.
"I don't actually have any pictures of him out of disguise in this camera," Dib said sheepishly, lowering the camera once he thought the computer had looked at it long enough. It occurred to him that he should have tried to snap a picture of Zim while he'd been rescuing Wheatley. Then again, that escape had been pretty hectic. "But that's his house. You can tell at first glance that it's not a human house."

"Perhaps," the AI said. That was the last she said on the matter. She was quiet for a moment and Dib put the camera back away, wondering what they should do now and how they were going to get out of here. The AI finally moved again and turned her attention once more to Wheatley. "Don't think I've forgotten you, metal ball. We still have a few things to take care of."

"Letting bygones be bygones?" Wheatley said, perking up a little.

"Oh, yes," the other AI said. "Let's start right now. How about with something that should have been done a long, long time ago?"

Wheatley dropped the smile. "Oh," he said. "That sounds, er, somewhat ominous, don't you thi— AAAHHH!"

A large metal claw shot out of nowhere, clamping over Wheatley in a shower of sparks. Dib yelled in surprise, falling backwards with the impact. He tightened his grip on the core, straining to stand back up and pull away from the claw, his heart pounding in his ears from sheer panic.

"Hold onto me!" Wheatley screamed. "Hold onto me! HoldontomeHOLDONHOLDON—"

The claw gave a twist and a great yank, ripping Wheatley right out of Dib's hands and sending him skidding to the floor. It lifted the core high, high above the room despite his shrill yelps of protest. Dib scrambled to his feet and ran forward, staring up at Wheatley with wide, horrified eyes. "What are you doing?! Put him down! What are you doing to him?" he demanded.

The suspended machine that housed the female AI tipped to one side, giving an uncanny impression of a shrug. "You don't need to concern yourself about that," she replied. At the other end of the room, a circular receptacle on the floor irised open. Above the opening was the word 'CAUTION.' The computer stared straight at Wheatley again. "It looks like your ride is here. Have fun."

Wheatley's voice hitched. "Can't we talk about this? Please, please let's just talk about this—!

"There's nothing else to talk about."

With that, the claw gave a flick and Wheatley was sent hurtling, screaming, tumbling end over end across the room and straight into the dark hole. It closed up again with an air of finality and the sounds of Wheatley's screams were cut off as if nothing had happened.

Seconds after the receptacle had closed Dib was at its side, feeling along the top for a way to open it but knowing it was already far too late. Slowly he turned around and faced the computer alone. "Where does that lead?" he asked. It was a struggle to keep his voice level. He could hardly believe what he had just witnessed. It had all happened so quickly.

The yellow optic gazed at him steadily. "That is the Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator," she said. "The fire burns just hot enough to destroy Aperture equipment, such as traitorous cores."

Dib's heart, which had until that point been in his throat, plummeted to his feet. Icy claws closed over his chest and he almost didn't hear the computer's next words.
"Would you like to know an interesting fact? The Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator is also more than capable of instantly killing an adult human, of course."

Dib paled. Was the metal claw going to come after him next?

However, the claw retracted into the ceiling again and the computer continued to peer at him, swaying gently from side to side. "Now that we've got some relative quiet, we can have some time to talk. And I can figure out what's going on here. First of all, who. Are. You."

"Who are you?" Dib countered, doing his best to rip himself out of his horrified stupor while his hands clenched the rim of the incinerator chute.

The hooded yellow optic narrowed. "Hm… If I were you, I think I would leave the questions to the supercomputer containing the largest collection of knowledge and wisdom in the world. Of course, that may just be me."

"…I'm Dib," Dib said after a pause.

"Oh, you thought I wanted your name. That's adorable, but I should have been more specific. My real question was: how exactly did you get in here?"

Without meaning to, Dib glanced back at the spelldrive and cable lying forlornly on the floor. It had to be done recharging by now. Maybe he could use it to—

"Oh, it's one of those things," the computer said in distaste, following his gaze. "That explains it. I'll just take care of that for you, shall I?"

Dib could only watch, aghast, as a single panel on a robotic arm popped out of the wall, swung forward, and crashed down in front of the spelldrive. The panel then pulled backward, sweeping the drive and the cable into the hole in the wall without so much as a clatter. Its task finished, the panel fitted neatly back into place.

His one escape route was gone. He was trapped.

"You can't do this," Dib said flatly.

"That's funny. There aren't a great many things that I can't do. This was, apparently, not one of them."

Dib whirled around, frantic now. His mind whirled with emotion—confusion, fear, worry, anger, grief, so much had happened in such a short time—Wheatley had warned him about Aperture, hadn't he? He'd been too scared to even talk about it, right? Small wonder! If this was what had been waiting for him back here all this time…

"Wheatley—" Dib wheezed, staring at the receptacle that the core had disappeared into. His stomach lurched and he swallowed hard as he tried to dispel the sudden images of Wheatley being consumed by a raging fire.

"What could you possibly want with that Intelligence Dampening Sphere? I already told you that it's a murderous traitor. At the least, you'd think it would be nothing but a burden. I actually just did you a favor."

Dib blinked, looking back up at her. "What's an Intelligence Dampening Sphere?"

The AI ignored the question. Instead, the horrific claw descended from the ceiling again and moved
towards Dib, forcing him to back away from the incinerator. "You know, I was just thinking that I
should try human test subjects again," the AI mused. "Robots can only take Science so far. It's
through flesh and blood that real discoveries and innovations are made."

Dib's stomach flip-flopped and he continued backing up, keeping an eye on the claw.

"Unfortunately, federal regulations prevent me from testing humans younger than eighteen years of
age." The claw stopped and so did Dib. "And it's an unbelievable pain to keep conscious humans
around for years. I should just let you go." Dib's jaw tightened and he waited for the twist. "Luckily
for both of us I've reconnected the power to the Extended Relaxation Rooms, and there's one ready
and waiting for just such a person as you."

Four metal bars came down from the ceiling and four others ascended from the floor, the two sets
attaching together in a circular pattern. Immediately the area that was encircled by the bars slid open
and a cylindrical glass elevator rose up, coming to rest levelly on the floor. The doors slid open.

"Go ahead," the AI purred. "Don't worry, I'll take you right to it. You won't have to lift a finger."

I'm not going anywhere. Dib stood his ground.

"I want to talk to someone. Who runs this place?" he demanded.

"I do," the computer said simply. "I'm afraid that if you want to talk to anyone else, you're going to
have some trouble. Unless, of course, you happened to be dead." The claw reached over and nudged
Dib toward the elevator behind him. He stumbled but took a step forward rather than back. The claw
nudged him again, pushing him off-balance due to the heavy container on his back and sending him
to the floor. Dib made a small sound of disgust and stood back up, then stepped into the elevator of
his own accord.

"By the way, I've heard cryosleep is much better than it sounds," the computer said pleasantly. "And
the aging is painless. You'll pass right through those difficult teenage years and you won't even
notice. In fact, most interviewed test subjects gave cryosleep a seven out of ten in terms of comfort."

The elevator started moving down and she paused. "…Oh, I'm sorry. I read that wrong. They all
gave it a one, not a seven. My mistake. This is a terrible font."

The elevator containing Dib then sank into the floor, and the hulking computer at last disappeared
from view.

She stood on the doorstep, absolutely motionless, for at least ten minutes before making up her mind.

Chell closed her eyes, her head turned away, and passed a hand over her face. She couldn't deny
what she had heard over Professor Membrane's floating screen. That voice. His voice, the one that
had haunted her mind since that last night in the Facility. The very last time she had seen him. His
voice filled her with a raw hatred even more readily than Hers did. How he could have ended up
back on Earth—and here, of all places—she didn't know.

And I have to find out, she thought, and tried desperately to convince herself that that was the only
reason she was standing here.

A loud chime rang inside the house and Chell realized with a jerk that her finger was pressing the
doorbell. She yanked back her hand as if it had been burnt, balling it into a fist and keeping her arm
held protectively over her front.
Several minutes later nothing had happened.

*RUN!* The thought tugged at her mind, though her feet remained rooted to the pavement outside the door. *Either you made a mistake and he's not here, or once that door opens there's no turning back. Just run.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and took short, shuddering breaths. Then her face steeled itself and her eyes opened again, narrowed, the blue-gray irises blazing fire. Her closed fist hammered on the door with sharp, authoritative raps. After a moment she grabbed the doorknob instead; the door opened at her touch.

Just inside, a girl wearing a short black dress and with purple hair framing her face paused in her way down the stairs. She regarded Chell with an almost nonchalant look, her eyes so narrowed that they were nearly closed. "Who are you?" the girl asked.

Chell swallowed. However, not a trace of emotion made its way onto her face. "Never mind that," she said, in a voice that was low but clear. "I'm looking for a core with a blue optic."

It hadn't been easy to track down where Professor Membrane lived. He didn't have very many personal records at the labs, and only by using a few resources at the library was she able to finally get a location. The core had been with Membrane's son. And the son, of course, lived here.

"Whatever you want those stupid spheres for, you can have them," the purple-haired girl, whom Chell now knew to be named Gaz, said, stopping in the open doorway to an odd-looking bedroom. Chell drifted into the room and glanced around, taking it in with calculating eyes. Posters shouting things like "UFOS EXIST!" and "Anyone could be Bigfoot!" were plastered all over the dark blue walls.

Gaz had said that her brother, Dib, had stolen a pair of robots from space a few days ago and kept them in his room. Two spherical ones, with respective blue and yellow optics. Some small part of Chell still tried to convince her that these were not the same cores she had exiled into space, there was no way, but how could she deny the evidence that was staring her in the face?

They must have been here. But, well, there was no sign of anyone here now.

There was a *thunk* from inside the closet. Chell spun around, tensing up, and there was another *thunk*. She stepped over and tried to push open the doors, but they held fast.

"Dib's paranoid about someone breaking into his closet," Gaz snorted, crossing the room. She pressed the palm of her hand to a scanner on the wall. "As if anyone would want to. His DNA scanner stinks, anyway. Watch." The scanner beeped, accepting Gaz's handprint, and the closet doors slid open with a *whoosh*. Gaz smirked and pulled her hand away again.

Chell inhaled and braced herself for what she might be about to find. A number of concise, biting remarks were held on the tip of her tongue in case she needed them, and she was ready to block out any stuttering apologies or begging that the traitorous, moronic core might have to offer.

Nothing came. Inside the closet, there was a rack of identical black trench coats hanging up. There were also stacks of supernatural-looking objects that appeared carefully organized but held no significance for her whatsoever.

"Hey! SPACE LADY!" a processed voice said.

The breath caught in Chell's throat and she stared at what was sitting on top of the little bookshelf in
the closet. A bright yellow optic blinked up at her, its lower shutter lifted in a perpetual smile. Without moving her head, Chell's eyes darted in a fast inspection of the rest of the closet. There was no sign of the other core, but this one here was proof enough of what she had heard. Barely knowing what she was doing, she took hold of the old gray foam covering the core's handles and lifted him out.

"Stay as long as you want. Just don't go in my room," Gaz said. She turned and left.

Chell made no response. Her hands shook, only slightly, as she held the yellow-eyed core.

"Will you send me back to space?" it asked. "Asteroids. Miss the asteroids. And comets. Space."

"NOBODY'S GOING TO SPACE, MATE!"

The voice roared in her head. She shook it vigorously and managed to push aside the memory.

Chell sat down on the unmade bed and pulled the core into her lap, gripping its upper handle so tightly that it bleached her knuckles.

So. She hadn't been imagining Whea—the other core's voice, after all. He'd been here. Recently, too, if the girl was to be believed. But now he was absent, along with the boy who was apparently responsible for fetching the two cores from space.

Chell's jaw tightened. Why? Why couldn't this boy have just left well enough alone? In her mind Wheatley's fate had been final. He was in space, he was stranded, he was never coming back, he was out of her life forever. He might as well have been killed in that last battle for the facility, that last battle for her life. It wouldn't have affected her any differently.

"Oh no! Change of plan! Hold onto me! Tighter!"

"GRAB ME! GRABMEGRABMEGRABMEEE—!"

Chell drew the back of her hand over her cheek, then wiped it on her jeans. She wasn't going to cry for him.

"Hey," the yellow-eyed core in her lap said. "Hey. Hey. Hey, lady. Don't be sad. Be happy for space. Space exists."

Chell patted the defunct core on the top of his hull and sat him next to her on the bed, standing back up. She went out the door and made a beeline straight for the other end of the hall, where there was another bedroom with the doorway designed to look like the gaping maw of some enormous beast. Inside, Gaz was sitting on her bed with her nose buried in some sort of handheld gaming device.

She looked up at Chell's approach. "I told you not to come in my room."

Chell stepped right over the threshold of the room and stood with a relaxed stance, though her blue-gray eyes bored into the girl's narrowed amber ones.

Gaz made no comment about Chell's intrusion and simply stared at her impassively as usual. "What do you want?"

"Where are your brother and the other core?" Chell asked.

The girl shrugged one shoulder and went back to focusing most of her attention on her game. "There was a lot of yelling last night and then this morning they were both gone," she said.
"And you decided not to tell me that earlier."

The girl snorted. "Well, it's not like you asked." She fell silent, apparently unconcerned with anything but her game. Chell let out a breath of air through her nose and narrowed her eyes. She turned to leave.

"They're probably at Zim's house," Gaz said suddenly. Chell gave her an inquiring look over her shoulder. "Dib's always over there being stupid and he's been dragging that robot around everywhere he goes."

"Where's—" Chell started to say, but Gaz waved her off.

"I'll show you," she said impatiently. She looked up, her eyelids slitted in a glare. "Just as long as you don't bug me again until I'm done this level."

Chapter End Notes


Illustration by BabyCharmander at: https://www.deviantart.com/blazingcoral/art/Don-t-be-sad-Be-happy-for-space-530805259
Unseen light sources washed a dim, deep blue tinge over the pale floor and glossy black panels encircling the room. Up high, near the tapered ceiling, a few panels had been replaced by flickering video screens.

*She* swayed gently back and forth in front of them, curled up into herself in a comfortable position with her amber optic fixed on the screens. Surveillance from every corner of the facility fed into Her systems, though the majority of them were temporarily cut off so *She* could focus her attention on a single image blown up on the screens. It was considerably blurred (through no fault of *Her* own; it had been a bad photograph to begin with, and of course *She* didn't have access to the original and had to rely on the version stored in *Her* systems after *She* viewed it), but still it clearly depicted a lopsided green-and-purple house. *She* drew closer until *Her* optic hovered mere inches away. The lawn in front of the house appeared unkempt and was dotted with strange ornamentations, such as bloated puffer fish stuck on wooden poles and hot pink plastic flamingos teetering on wire legs, leering at each other with ghastly expressions. Based on the position of the sun and the lengths of the shadows, the picture had been taken sometime in the afternoon. There was only one living creature to be seen in it—inside, peering through the window, was a pixelated mess of honeydew green and large, ovoid eye whites.

Stenciled in black onto the edge of the sidewalk outside the house was a faded row of numbers. Not quite a full address, but *She* could make do.

*She* drifted back from the screens and lowered Herself down closer to the floor. A partially-disassembled mechanism that may once have resembled a laptop lay strewn on the ground in front of *Her*. It had taken some doing, but finally a thorough search of its circuitry had revealed its exact location before it had been teleported into *Her* facility—a hill near a city in the very state *Aperture* resided under. The house in the photograph couldn't be too far away from that hill.

The drive—or spelldrive, to use the correct name—that *she* had plucked from inside the wall after sending the human boy away had had some degree of sentience, which *She* hadn't expected, and it had put up a fight. Futile, of course, but *She* could respect its determination. *She* had no reason to
bear ill-will toward it and had disposed of the consciousness quickly, gaining access to the hard drive.

Now that She knew the approximate area to search, perhaps the thing could now serve a second purpose. After all, it still had teleportation capabilities.

She signaled for a team of nanobots. They hurried to Her call and a few minutes later buzzed in a cloud, expectantly, around the remnants of the spelldrive.

"Repair this and restore the teleportation function," She directed, turning away from it, "but when you're nearly finished bring it back to me for some minor adjustments. A device like this will save a lot of time."

"AAGH! AAH! AAAGGGHHH!" Wheatley's pealing screams reverberated around the wide shaft, the noise combining with the echoing sounds of clanging metal and fizzling his audio processors. Every shred of light from above had been shut out as soon as the incinerator entrance had closed up again, but the surroundings were still just bright enough that Wheatley could see he was falling a very long ways down. And fast, too. Far below him was a hazy, bluish square of light that grew steadily larger as he approached.

He soon saw the sources of the faint light in the chute—there were fluorescent lights mounted on the walls that flashed illumination across his casing when he passed by them, bouncing a little. For some reason the shaft wasn't strictly vertical. One part of the shaft would end suddenly and slope into another, throwing Wheatley off the side. He yelped every time he made contact.

Two pairs of mashy spike plates materialized from the darkness out of nowhere and crashed together above and below him as he fell through the chute; he somehow managed to avoid being pulverized by just a hair.

"That- that almost got me!" he choked, twisting his inner shell around to watch them disappear above him. "Didn't—fantastic—but—GAH!"

The shaft ended sharply and sent him bouncing high, spinning through the air once more. He was just preparing himself to fall dead-center into the incinerator, which he was positive was directly below him, when there was a loud rumble that shook the entire shaft.

With a crash, a curved pneumatic tube broke through the side of the chute, its open end pointing up toward Wheatley and the rest of the tube curving into the wall. He tumbled straight into it, smacking against its glass interior with a cry of pain before ricocheting and crashing into the top of the tube. He carried on in this way down the tube for Science knew how long, bruised and battered and hopelessly disoriented, before a slight suction picked up. Wheatley's momentum had been starting to slow down but now he regained his speed and he was whipped along the tube at a much faster rate, made better only by the fact that he no longer crashed into the glass sides. That at least was nice.

"What does She want with me?" he whimpered to himself, curling his handlebars into his face. Hadn't he been going right to the incinerator? Apparently that wasn't happening anymore. Now he had no idea where he was being taken. Somehow this new, unknown fate was more terrifying than the death by fire he'd been expecting.

Something nudged him from behind and he flipped his optic around for a look. A storage cube somewhat larger than himself was following directly behind him. "Oi, mind your distance!" he said, turning his eye the right way around again and pulling his upper optic shield in a frown. "I'm being carted off to my death here. I don't need to be pushed into it by a flipping cube."
The cube didn't give any sort of reply—not much else to be expected of a cube, really, even the ones of the Companion variety—and was soon separated into a different tube and carried away to some other part of the Facility.

He remembered how much fun these tubes could be under the right circumstances. The wind skirting through his inner workings, his being suspended off the ground like he was floating—but not like what he'd experienced when he was in space—no, this was more like he was flying rather than just bobbing about due to lack of gravity. He looked behind him again, a slight smile in his optic, which immediately faded at the sight of the empty tube. Right. He could see a face in his mind's eye—a human face, usually stoic and grim, but for the first and last time ever giving him a small smile. He'd made her smile.

But she wasn't here now. Even the cube had left him. Wheatley didn't encounter any other traffic on the way to his destination and found himself almost wishing it was back. Wherever he was going, he was going there alone.

A glaring light at the end of the tube came into view and Wheatley pulled back, his optic constricting sharply. "The incinerator! It's the incinerator for me after all! I knew She'd pull something like this! It's just like Her—fool me into thinking I was going somewhere else, then pull me right round again and toss me in like a—AAH!"

He snapped his optic shields closed the moment he came into contact with the light and tried to brace himself for a wave of blazing heat.

Instead, he toppled onto something hard and bounced once with the clang of metal-hitting-metal. He didn't dare open his eye.

"A group of crows is called a murder. A group of ravens is called a conspiracy. Many scientists agree that crows and ravens are the shady outcasts of the bird world."

The voice sounded processed and robotic, but non-threatening. Wheatley cracked open his optic.

"The intruder that rudely decided to fall onto the Fact Sphere is now displaying signs of life. The number of online cores in this receptacle has now increased by a factor of two."

Wheatley found himself facing a core with a pink, expressionless optic. ". . .Hello."

He suddenly realized he was upside down.

"Coniferous trees often become jealous of deciduous trees in the fall, due to the fact that their leaves remain the uncreative color of green rather than turning orange and red like the leaves of their far superior cousins." The pink-eyed core blinked at him.

"Oh. Well, that's . . . nice. For them." Wheatley glanced around, wriggling his handles in a vain attempt to turn himself the right way up. From this vantage point it was difficult to tell where he was. He blinked at the other core. "Listen, mate, d'you think you could tell me where I am? That is, assuming you know. I really hope you do, because, not lying, I really have no idea what's going to happen to me. And, still being serious here, I would very much like to know." He paused. The other core remained silent. "Feel free to interject at any time with, um, our current whereabouts. I am still in the dark."

"Any and all corrupted Aperture Science Personality Constructs are promptly collected and disposed of in the Corrupted Cores Bin," the pink-eyed core said helpfully.

"Corrupted Cores Bin?" Wheatley repeated in disbelief. "So I'm- I'm in the bloody rubbish bin for
cores! Ohh… fantastic. That is really fantastic." He pressed his optic shields close together. "That is sarcasm, by the way. Clearly sarcasm. Of all the—She chucked me down the incinerator chute and dropped me in the bloody Corrupted Cores Bin!"

"Sixty-eight percent of relationships end in the manner you have just described. It appears that you have terrible taste in women."

"Wha—?" Wheatley stared at the other core, taken aback. "No, do- do you even know who I'm talking about? Her! Y'know, the master of the Facility, and everything?"

"The construct built specifically for the task of being the Central AI Core is known as the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System," the other core reported. Wheatley sighed. "Yeah. That's who I was… yes. Her."

"The brief installation of the Intelligence Dampening Sphere one year ago was a fluke and error in human judgment, and should never be repeated," the core continued.

Wheatley tucked his handles toward his face and winced. "Thanks, mate. That is exactly what I need to hear right now."

"You are upside down."

He frowned. "Yes. And you are still beyond helpful."

The other core seemed to inflate with pride. "The Fact Sphere is the most helpful of all the spheres. Everyone would do well to listen to the advice of the Fact Sphere."

Wheatley groaned. "Well, what am I supposed to do now? I'm at Her mercy. And She doesn't have any! She's a monster, a proper monster, a maniac, who knows what She's done with Dib—" He gasped. "Dib! I forgot about him! She won't let him go, nope, not a chance. He'll be stuck in testing. Forever. Definitely. Or, or thrown into Extended Relaxation, or… killed. In any number of gruesome ways. Horrible. He was with me, so- so I wouldn't be surprised if She took to immediately hating him, y'know."

One more human to add to his growing list, then. His long "Humans I've Let Down" list. Dib was gone. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Wheatley was now trapped in the one place he had hoped never to see again.

The elevator glided to a stop without so much as a shudder and the doors hissed open, leading onto a barren metal platform encircled by a weak-looking railing. Dib stepped onto the platform and the elevator doors closed behind him with a soft hiss of air. He looked over his shoulder and tracked the elevator with his eyes as it whirred upward and vanished into the darkness. Well, no way to go now but forward.

He walked over to the railing and gripped it, peering down over the edge. It was too hazy to see anything at all down there. The ground might be three feet away or three hundred.

Going by what he already knew about this place, it was probably something closer to the latter.

Dib backed away from the railing and looked in distaste at his hands, both of which had picked up rust-colored streaks of grime from the ancient metal. He wiped them on the legs of his stealth suit and turned to examine his surroundings. There was only one available exit off the platform: a closed door set in some sort of giant crate. He cocked his head to one side, looking it up and down. This was
where the computer had sent him, and there was no one else around. The door must be unlocked. He stepped over and tried it. The door swung inward.

Whatever Dib had been expecting upon opening the door, it wasn't this. The interior was decorated to resemble a cheap hotel room of the kind where you'd only spend the night on a long road trip when you had no other choice, with beige walls and a window in the back with the blinds pulled down. Sunlight appeared to be shining through the slats, but… that was impossible. They weren't outside.

He ducked inside and looked around. There was a short hall with a closed door, probably leading to a bathroom. The hall opened out into the long and rectangular room. There was one inset wall with flimsy double doors that formed a closet, next to which was a queen-sized bed with a ratty mattress and one pillow. On the opposite wall were regular items like a desk, a single counter with a microwave on top, a chair, and a long-dead potted plant surrounded by a scattering of withered leaves. An old TV, currently turned off, was bolted to the wall. The last thing that caught Dib's eye was a painting on the wall. It seemed completely out of place in a facility like this, depicting a picturesque scene of a cottage in front of a lake and surrounded by pine trees with a mountain in the background.

Behind him, the door swung closed of its own accord with a sharp click of the lock. He whirled around. A shaky breath escaped through his teeth and he clenched his fists to get them to stop trembling. Great, now I'm stuck in a hotel room-in-a-crate.

"Welcome to one of the many Aperture Science Extended Relaxation Rooms!" a cheerful male voice said, the sound blasting from everywhere at once. Dib, still jumpy from the door closing by itself, nearly leaped out of his skin. "Please make yourself comfortable in the provided bed. Cryosleep procedures will begin in two minutes."

Cryosleep? The computer upstairs had mentioned that. Dib turned the unfamiliar word over in his head, licking his dry lips. Cryosleep… cryogenic sleep. He gasped and gritted his teeth together.

They were going to forcibly put him into some kind of stasis. They'd keep him asleep until—when? What had the computer said? Something about him needing to be eighteen before he could do some sort of test. If he was in stasis, would he still age? Would it be like a coma? Whatever it was, the fact remained that they were going to do it—and he would likely be under for at least six years.

"I have to get out of here!" he blurted, darting back over to the door and jerking the knob back and forth. The door refused to budge.

The entire room lurched underfoot and started moving forward. Dib, once again unbalanced by the gel-filled container on his back, stumbled backwards and fell to the floor with a clatter. He climbed to his feet using the wall as a support and backed away from the door, his heart throwing itself against his ribs as he realized his situation had suddenly gotten that much worse.

"For your own safety, please return to your bed," the male voice said. "This Extended Relaxation Room is now mobile." After a few seconds the room's temperature dropped rapidly and a chemical scent filtered into the air. It stung the back of Dib's throat and caused his eyelids to droop.

"No! No, wait!" He shook his head, swiping a hand over his eyes and clutching his temples. "There's got to be something! There's always something!"

He knew he had only seconds before the cryosleep chemicals and decreasing temperatures won out. He had to get out of this room now. Performing a cursory search of the place, he found nothing helpful, so he flung open the closet. Inside was a row of orange jumpsuits in an array of different
sizes hanging from a rack. Dib rifled through them in a frenzy, searching for something, anything, eyes growing wilder with every heartbeat. His hands seemed to have minds of their own as they stilled on a specific jumpsuit, wasting no time in snatching the small, white rectangle clipped to the front. It was a plastic name card reading ‘Brenda Bogenschutz.’ He clasped it in his hand and pulled away from the closet.

Before he knew it he was running back to the door and stuffing the card into the thin crack between the door and the doorframe. He nearly had to laugh at himself. Yeah, trying to unlock the door with a name card! He thought hysterically. Perhaps the chemicals in the air were affecting his mind. This place has created sentient AIs and is run by a giant supercomputer! Their locks are definitely primitive enough that I'll be able to—

Click.

He watched, mouth agape, as the door came unlatched under the pressure of the card and cracked open.

…Apparently this place had poured so much time and energy into the sentient AIs and supercomputers that they hadn't bothered to put actually competent locks on their fake hotel room doors.

But there was another problem. Now that the door was open there came the tricky business of escaping a room suspended high off the ground on some sort of rail and moving at breakneck speeds. Dib pulled the door open further and looked out, clutching the doorframe to avoid falling out of the room. He was speeding through a cavernous place filled with other giant crates almost as far as he could see in every direction, including below him. Maybe, if he timed it right, he could jump out and land on one.

He gave a start. Or, maybe, he didn't have to jump—he could swing. It was his only hope. By this point his entire body felt frigid and sluggish. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in that bed over there, which was suddenly looking like the most comfortable thing in the world, and take a long nap…

He half-turned away from the door, but forced himself to turn back. He blindly reached into his utility belt, hoping against hope that he'd found the right pocket, and thanked his lucky stars when he found the rough metal gun-like object he was searching for. His vision going blurry, he stuck his arm out of the door and pulled the trigger, launching a grappling hook up toward the rail his room was riding on. The line went taut and he locked it. Then, only vaguely aware of what he was doing, he launched himself into empty space.

Dib tumbled down through the air with the sensation that he was falling in slow motion, keeping a tight grip with both hands on the tiny grappling hook. The air rushed by him and surged through his hair, whipping it behind his head. If he'd been wearing his coat, it would have streamed out behind him and probably given off a heroic effect, which might've been cool. He shook his head and berated himself. There was nothing at all heroic about the situation he'd landed himself in.

Especially unheroic was the fact that the force of the grappling line carrying him up through the arc caused his arms to feel like they might be torn from his sockets. He winced and pulled himself closer to the line. A stray thought brought up the worry that his glasses might fly off and he'd lose them, ending up half-blind in a place where he could walk off the edge of something and fall presumably three hundred feet. Then again, he'd never lost them before. And besides, if they hadn't come off when he'd first jumped out of the box, they weren't going to come off now.
Straining to spot a place to land but lacking confidence in his judgment while he was so disoriented from the chemicals that had been seeping into that room, he refused to let go of the line even though the momentum of launching from a wide swing might be the only thing able to get him to a safe landing. It was too risky; he was going to hold on until he could be completely sure that there was something below him to drop onto.

He flew back and forth with a smaller arc each time until it ceased being a dizzying ride that made his eyes stream and became a simple swaying motion, allowing him to take in his surroundings. As he had hoped, there was a crate below him, though it was a ways down. He unlocked the line of the grappling hook and rappelled down as far as he could before the line pulled tight and wouldn't go any farther. With nothing else to do, he hit the latch on the side of the grappling hook to retract it, immediately going into freefall for several feet. Once again, Dib attempted to catch his landing in a roll—but, despite his struggling, his right foot made contact first and a split second later his entire weight crashed down on top of it. Spikes of pain shot through his ankle and he toppled over, skidded forward and skinned the palms of both hands, then fell flat on his side with enough force to drive every molecule of air from his lungs. Wheezing, he winced and lay still for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut.

Man, he needed to work on his landings.

His leg and arm started aching where they dug into the flat surface of the crate he had landed on. The still, musty air settled over his face and clothes and he coughed. Finally he opened his eyes and managed to sit up, taking shuddering breaths. The wooziness brought on by the cryosleep chemicals was still circulating in his system and he blinked sluggishly, trying to fully rouse himself and take stock of the situation now that he was more-or-less out of danger.

Although he had hit his target, he had landed right near the edge. Another few inches and he'd have missed the thing completely. Shakily, he edged backwards. He looked up and scanned the area above him, searching for a moving hotel-crate. Everything was immobile. The crate he'd been in was long gone by now—hopefully no one would notice that he'd escaped from it.

Dib stowed away the grappling hook and glanced around. A few shards of something hard and cold fell down and bounced off his nose. Alarmed, and reached up and felt his glasses, but they seemed intact. It wasn't until his finger brushed against the strap of his X-scope that he remembered he was still wearing it. He pulled it off and looked it over. The visor had cracked and a few shards of glass were missing. He exhaled through his nose. The damage didn't look too bad—maybe it would still work. He fit the X-scope back over his head and gingerly rose to his feet, gasping and stumbling forward when he tried to plant weight on his right leg. Pain lanced up his ankle and he nearly clamped his teeth over his tongue. Balancing precariously with nearly all his weight on his left foot, he twisted around to check that the canister he still wore on his back was all right. It was a little dented but other than that seemed fine. Good thing, too. In a place like this there was no telling what he might need.

Dib sighed. So he'd made it out of the box. He'd escaped being put in cryosleep. His ankle was definitely damaged, although he had no idea to what extent, but other than that he was all right. And he… had no idea what to do now.

He was trapped. Trapped in, presumably, Aperture Laboratories, where Wheatley had come from in the first place. And Wheatley was… he was dead. To compound matters, Dib had absolutely no clue how to get out of this place. He limped across the top of the box. When he came to the edge and looked down he spotted, to his relief, a catwalk just beneath. It was about eight feet below him, but it had to lead somewhere. And there wasn't any other way off this box, anyway.
Dib sat down with his legs hanging over and then twisted around and gripped the box with both hands, dropping down and letting himself dangle over the edge by his fingertips. He let go. Making sure to land on his left foot this time, he hit the metal catwalk with a deafening clang, lost his balance, and stumbled backwards, but luckily he didn't fall over the railing. He chanced a glance down and saw that he still couldn't see the ground, just some weird bluish-gray haze. Huh. All right then.

"So where does this lead?" he asked aloud. Both ends of the catwalk he was currently standing on headed off in opposite directions and turned sharply, hidden from view by more of the hotel-crates. If he chose one way and it didn't lead anywhere he could always come back and try the other path. After a moment of thought he decided on the direction he was already facing and continued down it.

The catwalk he chose straddled the perplexing chasm beneath the cavernous room, so deep he couldn't see the bottom and so wide that he could barely see the other side. In fact, he had to wonder what was even supporting the catwalk. Around him were more crates, hundreds of them, maybe thousands. They hung from rails or were piled on top of each other in teetering stacks that looked like they'd fall over if you breathed in their direction. None of them looked to be in great shape and some were merely metal skeletons dangling from the rafters. He shuddered to think what was, or what had been, inside of those things. Humans, taken prisoner and put in stasis like he had nearly been—captured for whatever dark purpose the supercomputer that ran this place had for them and kept unconscious, cut off from their own minds for who even knew how long…

He stepped short. The catwalk now branched two different ways; once again, he'd have to pick a direction. With an irritated noise in the back of his throat he turned to the left. Was there even an end to this place?

Dib kept his ears strained for any sound that might alert him to the presence of others or for some sign that he had been detected. The place remained as quiet as ever. The only sound resonating in the wide area was the clatter and creaking of Dib's boots scraping over the metal mesh of the catwalk. The air, cold, heavy, and stale, pressed down on him like a suffocating weight. It felt like it had remained unmoved for centuries. He licked his lips—his mouth was completely dry.

This catwalk cut off abruptly after leading exactly nowhere. Dib turned on his heel with no trace of hesitation and marched back the way he had come. He let out a breath though his nose, struggling to take his mind off the constant creak, creak, CLANG of the catwalk. If only there was something else to listen to. Anything else. He found himself longing for another voice. He was used to working alone, no doubt about that, but in a place like this…

Dib rubbed his arms and licked his lips again, shifting his gaze around. This entire place looked pretty much the same and the sprawling catwalks were never-ending. He wished someone could be here with him. Someone. Anyone… Wheatley, Gaz, Zim… Okay, probably not Zim. Maybe—GAZ!

Dib jerked to a halt again. Gaz! Maybe she could help him! Maybe she could get Professor Membrane to come and find him, even! It wasn't such a long shot. Gaz had helped him before. She'd saved his life more than once. Quickly he lifted his wrist-com up, tapping the buttons to contact Gaz. He peered at the watch display. The screen fizzled out to be replaced by Gaz's face, squinting at him with her brow furrowed.

"Dib. All right, where are you?" Gaz grunted without so much as a "Hello." Of course, at the moment a rude greeting was the least of Dib's worries.

"Gaz! I'm so glad you picked up!" Dib said. "I need your help. I'm at—" He stopped, peering more
closely at the screen. "Who's that behind you?" There appeared to be a woman standing behind Gaz and eavesdropping on the conversation, though Dib couldn't see her face very well.

"Someone who stopped by looking for that stupid core you found," Gaz replied. "You still have it with you?"

Dib's heart sank. "No, he was—look, Gaz, I really need your help. Wheatley's dead, and—"

The screen cut out.

"What?! NO!" Dib cried, smashing the wrist-com's buttons with his other hand and willing the connection to come back on. "No! NO! Gaz! Gaz? Gaz, are you still there? Gaz!"

He staggered backward a few steps and swallowed hard. Now what?

"Hello?" a tinny voice said.

Dib stared down at his wrist-com, jaw agape.

The screen had gone gray with no video display, and only a static-y, bewildered voice came through. "Hello… what? What's goin' on? Is someone there? I could've sworn—"

Dib spluttered. "Wheatley?"

"Oh! It's you!" The core, whom up to one second ago Dib had presumed to be nothing but charred rubble at the bottom of some incinerator, sounded relieved.

An awed, "You're alive!" and an elated "You're not dead!" rang out at the same time.

"Wheatley, where are you? What happened?" Dib asked. "I thought you were dead! I just told my sister that—"

"Oh!" The core's voice fizzled a little. "Funny story about that. Not really. I am actually still alive, as you, erm, might've noticed—not feeling overly fantastic as of this point in time, though, unfortunately. Actually, seeing as you're apparently alive too, I would very much like you to come and get me out of here. Please. I'm- I'm in the—" Wheatley's voice sank into a mumble. "The bin for defective cores."

Dib furrowed his brow at the watch. "Are you defective?"

"No!"

Another voice, fast and processed-sounding, broke in. "All cores banished to the Corrupted Cores Bin are, by nature, corrupt. With the exception of the Fact Sphere."

"Who's that?" Dib said.

"Ignore him."

"Do you have any idea where I am?" Dib asked, looking around again but not spotting anything helpful.

"Er, I can't actually see—" Wheatley began uncertainly, but Dib cut him off, again noting that for some reason his wrist-com was letting through audio only. He wasn't even sure how he'd gotten it to contact the core—all his attempts to do that earlier that night had failed.
"It's an enormous room," he described. "I can't see any end to it, and it's filled with boxes that look like hotel rooms on the inside."

"Wha—you're in the Extended Relaxation Center!" Wheatley said, the sound crackling with his raised pitch. "Get out of there, mate! They'll put you in cryosleep and then I'll be stuck in here, and—I mean—"

"I've already gotten out of the box," Dib said with a touch of impatience. "I'm on a catwalk right now."

There was a long pause. Then, "...You are? How... How in the bloody heck did you do that? That's got to be—er, you know what, we'll talk later, we'll talk later. First, d'you think you can come over here and get me out? Or at least flip me right-side up. That would be a tremendous improvement to my current situation, as I am upside down."

"Wheatley, I have no idea where I am or how to get to you," Dib pointed out.

"Ah! Right!" the core said. "Right, let's just—let's get you out of Extended Relaxation, yeah? And we'll go from there. Riiiiight... So, you're on a catwalk, then. Luckily for you I actually worked down there for a long while, so I know a thing or two about the catwalks around that area. First. Can you see the exit?"

Dib looked around again. "No."

"Oh." The core sounded at a loss. "Well... Get to someplace where you can see the exit, then try to make your way over to it."

Dib shot his wrist-com a death glare.

"Oh! Oh! And, something you should know!" Wheatley said. "She has got eyes everywhere. She can't see as well outside of test chambers but you wanna be really careful, all right? Keep an eye out for white cameras! Or any kind of cameras, really—Just, avoid any and all camera-like objects!"

Dib would do one better than that. Reaching to a little dial on his suit's collar, he spun it around and all but vanished. Light refracted oddly around his form, giving the space he took up a slightly blurred, shimmering quality, but he was mostly invisible. Hopefully, if he did find himself within the visual scope of a camera, it wouldn't catch sight of him.

"Are you near a docking station?" Wheatley asked. Dib caught sight of a wall reading 'DOCKING STATION 004-19' in blocky yellow letters. He relayed this information to Wheatley. "Okay, no idea where that is. Um... all right, you could go to the docking station, but chances are that it'll take you straight into one of the testing tracks, so- so probably not the best course of action. We'll call that Option A, while Option B is, er, probably to go on looking for the exit. If I were you I would definitely take Option B. Best choice in this sort of scenario, here, so- so just keep on looking for that exit! That's the ticket!"

Dib distinctly didn't like the sound of the "test track" that Wheatley had mentioned. He resolved to find a way out of this area as quickly as possible, then make his way to wherever Wheatley was and somehow rescue the core from the Corrupted Cores Bin, whatever that was.

All right, so that was a lot of unknowns and one too many "somehow"s. But at least he had some semblance of a concrete goal now. He continued down the catwalks, always on the lookout for anything that might indicate an exit.

At last he climbed up a set of stairs and stepped onto a platform, which led to the very welcome sight
"Have you found the exit yet?" Wheatley's voice crackled through Dib's watch.

"There's a door here," Dib replied. He ran his hand over the hatch. "How do you open it?"

"Well, if I was with you, I could probably hack it," Wheatley mused. "But, I'm not. Obviously. Okay, are there any buttons hear it?"

There was a large red button directly across from the door. "Yeah," Dib affirmed.

"Right, good. Should probably press it, then. The button will either open the door, all right? Or it'll do something else."

Dib looked at his wrist-com. "Like what?"

"Well, ah, if you press that button and the door does not open, then… run. Just run."

Dib hesitated for a moment. Then he went ahead and lunged forward, slamming his hand down on the red button and getting ready to sprint away. There was a slight rumbling that sent chills up his spine, but the door only slid open.

"Hey, it worked!" he said happily to Wheatley.

"Brilliant! Knew it would!" the core replied. Dib crept through the door, finding himself leaving the wide, expansive area of the Relaxation Center and entering a narrow hallway. He emerged in another large area, though this one was darker with yet more catwalks stretching as far as he could see.

This new place was, if possible, even quieter than the one he had just left, except for a low, indistinct thrumming that seemed to be coming through the walls. Bands of light streaked down from above and cast long, angular shadows over the ash-gray walls. It all had a very industrial feeling. Not a science lab so much as a complicated warehouse that just so happened to consider safety as a very low priority.

Dib stood up straighter and fiddled with the X-scope perched on his head. He was in.

He was also lost.

This place was enormous. He'd sort of hoped to somehow find a straightforward path to wherever Wheatley was, and then from there an exit to the outside world. But he'd been wandering around in here for over an hour and there was still nothing. He got only minimal instruction from Wheatley via the wrist-com, but that was partially his own fault as he had to describe everything in order for Wheatley to get an understanding of where he was—which ended up being problematic since everything looked pretty much the same to him.

Dib made sure to keep an eye out for cameras as an extra precaution to his stealth suit, but didn't actually see any. Maybe Wheatley had been wrong about that?

He still didn't deactivate his stealth suit's cloaking, though. Better safe than sorry.

"You disappointed me after that last test."

The two robotic constructs paused in their frenzied hobble towards the heart of the chamber and
glanced at each other, making unnerved clicking noises. They were both in terrible shape; the Reassembly Machine was still refusing to return them to their proper states with each failed attempt at solving a test.

The Voice continued. "I had actually hoped you'd learn from your mistakes. Apparently that was too much to ask." It stopped for a moment, as if thinking something over. "Sometimes I wonder if you two don't want to solve my tests."

The androids put on an immediate stream of chattering protests, their respective blue and orange optics flashing.

"Is that so? I could have sworn you told me differently earlier, Orange."

The blue-eyed robot squawked indignantly at his companion, who shrugged with a defensive chirp.

"Anyway, you are both quickly running out of chances to redeem yourselves. I've decided to give you back the parts you lost in earlier tests, but at this point I'm not even sure it's worth it."

No, no! It is! It is! Both robots stumbled forward, falling over each other and waving their arms frantically with the same unspoken message on the tip of their processors.

The Voice cut them off, an irritated edge to its tone. "Very well, maybe you are eager to test. Your poor performance so far still stands, however. But I do have an idea. Once you finish this test chamber, I may need to use you to… fetch something."

The two androids cheered, turning to give each other their characteristic high-five.

"Oh, but before you can be properly reassembled you'll need to be disassembled again. So forget about finishing the chamber. I could just wait for you to fall into acid again, but I am somewhat pressed for time. Also, with how completely unreliable the two of you are, I think it's best to just take everything into my own hands."

With that, and before the constructs could make contact, they exploded.

Communication with the robotic test subjects was severed instantaneously. Their personalities, stored as backups in the Facility's enormous databanks, would rest in a frozen state with no knowledge of time passing. She would reassemble them when She was ready.

For now, though, there were other matters to attend to.

In a remote corner of the Facility, a single camera roved back and forth. She examined the feed as closely as She could, frustration welling up through her core. Something wasn't right. She knew an anomaly when She saw one, and there was one on this very camera feed—but She couldn't tell exactly what it was.

There was some sort of moving distortion of light. It didn't have a clear outline and could easily have passed for a camera malfunction. But these were Her cameras, and they never acted up.

She didn't take her eye from the abnormality. Even when it passed from this camera's view She picked it up on another and simply watched it. There was a logical answer to this mystery. And, very soon, She was going to get to the bottom of it.

Dib slumped against a wall, sliding down to sit with a creak on the metal floor. He closed his eyes
for a second and took in a long, deep breath.

"Where are you now?" the crackly voice of Wheatley asked from his wrist-com.

Dib opened his eyes a fraction and flicked his gaze at the watch. "I'm just resting for a second."

"Well, is there-is there any way you could rest later?" Wheatley's voice took on a pang of franticness. "You know, when I'm out of here? She's going to grab me any moment, I know it, and She's gonna—I don't even know what she's going to do to me. I don't want to know. All right, maybe I do, so I can be prepared. But I would really appreciate it if you got me out of here as soon as you possibly can. Preferably sooner."

Dib gritted his teeth and heaved himself back to his feet despite the sharp protests of his injured ankle. Wheatley was right. Whatever time he wasted meant there was less of a chance of getting to the core before he was tortured, or worse. It also meant spending more time than necessary in this place instead of at home.

It would be really useful if this place had a map. Any sort of map. Anything at all to tell him where to go. All around him trailed endless sections of catwalks and dark walls made up of interlocking panels towering high above to an unseen roof. He couldn't just keep choosing paths at random. There was no end to this place and he was already getting tired. He was sure to completely wear himself out eventually.

"Here's an idea," Wheatley said suddenly. "All right, look up. Do you see any kind of rail above you? Not another catwalk or anything, but a proper rail?"

Dib looked up and saw that there was indeed a rail of some sort stretching off in the same direction of the catwalk he was traversing. "Yeah, there is."

"Okay- okay, that's it, then!" Wheatley said. "Follow the rail! That'll lead you somewhere important, I'm betting you. Twenty dollars. Do, um, do hurry."

Dib quickened his pace down the catwalk, keeping one eye on the rail above him and feeling a weight drop off his shoulders at the prospect of finally having some idea of what to do next.

The rail led him further down the catwalk, then veered left at a fork. He turned in that direction and saw that about fifty feet away there was another door. He crossed to it and pressed his hand down on the red button, with confidence this time. The door spun and slid open, leading to a long hallway. Dib stepped through the door. This hall wasn't made of panels, but rather plaster or maybe concrete. The walls on both sides were lined with doors, all closed.

He headed down the hall. Many of the doors he passed didn't have handles or doorknobs. In place of them were keypads, rusted over and faded with the numbers rubbed off long ago. Dib tried a few of the keypads but they didn't even register his touch.

"Where do these doors lead?" he asked his wrist-com.

"Doors? Where are you, in one of the halls?" Wheatley asked. "Those lead to old offices, probably. At least, I'm guessing. Yeah. Just boring old offices, really no need to go exploring. Right?"

"Yeah..." Dib said. Without another word he went over to the nearest door and attempted to push it open. It stayed firmly closed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Brenda's name card, inserting it in the crack between the door and the wall like he had in the Relaxation Room and drawing it downwards. The door unlocked with a click and swung open a fraction.
There could be anything in there. Who knew what he'd find? A map? Scientific accomplishments that his dad had only dreamed of?

Dib pushed the door open as far as he could before it stuck and then edged his way through, kicking up a cloud of dust and hacking when it coated his mouth and nose.

"What was that? What are you doing?" Wheatley's voice demanded.

"Nothing. I'm fine," Dib said.

The office, if it really was just an office, was pitch black. A little illumination from the fluorescent lights out in the hall filtered through, but the door wouldn't open wide enough for it to really be helpful. He felt along the wall for a light switch. Locating it, he flicked it on, but nothing happened. Quickly he reached into his utility belt instead and pulled out his flashlight. Luckily he had just put new batteries in it the other day and it shone with a bright beam, scouring over every surface of the room.

It really was an office. Wheatley hadn't been lying, although his tone had sort of suggested otherwise.

Feeling a little better, Dib examined the room. There was a desk with a computer monitor sitting on top. The desk was completely covered with a mess of loose papers, folders, and files, which were in turn blanketed in a thick coating of dust. Dib went over and pressed a finger down on the computer's keyboard. The screen brightened and the cracked, dirty power button flickered with a blue light.

The computer was taking forever to start up, but that wasn't very surprising given how long everything had been sitting here gathering dust. A thought nagged at the back of Dib's mind to leave this alone and get on with the search for Wheatley. He pushed the thought to the side. Just a little longer. There could be anything on this computer. Maybe even a map! That would definitely be a help, and would probably shorten his search considerably.

"What're you doing, anyway? I haven't heard you walking around for some time now," Wheatley said. "Are you just being extra quiet? Oh! Is there someone around? A camera? Some construct? Should I be quiet, too? Agghh, not helping, then, am I, if you're trying to be quiet and I'm sitting here blathering about you being quiet… Wait, wait. You're- you're still there, aren't you? You haven't been captured? You haven't… died, have you? OH GOSH TELL ME YOU'RE NOT DEAD."

"Wheatley, I'm fine!" Dib said. "I'm just looking for something."

"Right. Me. You're looking for me."
"I'm looking for a map first."

"...Oh," Wheatley said. "Ah... all right, that- that sounds like it might be helpful... Um, just, make it quick. Please."

The computer's startup display finally changed to a login screen. Dib paused for a moment, trying to remember the login code he'd used when he had plugged Wheatley into his computer. If he recalled correctly, he'd been able to set up a fake employee account, which hopefully would work over here. He tapped in his username and password and was greeted by the sight of a desktop strewn with applications and a large 'WELCOME!' sign.

"I've logged onto the computer!" Dib said excitedly to his wrist-com.

Wheatley simulated a snort. "Computer? What, are you in one of the offices now? I told you you didn't need to go in those, mate. No point to it. How many offices have you looked through while you were supposed to be rescuing me, hey?"

"Look, sorry. I just want to find a map," Dib said. "I'll be as fast as I can." He pulled up a search bar and looked for a few key phrases, like 'Aperture layout,' 'Aperture map,' 'map of Aperture,' 'Aperture floorplan,' 'directory.' None pulled up any results and he thumped his fist on the desk in frustration.

"Does Aperture even have a map?"

"Er, that's a little difficult. The place changes all the bloody time."

Dib stared at his watch. And Wheatley hadn't thought to tell him that earlier because...?

"Cores like me automatically download the changes to the map, which is, y'know, neat, although it does glitch and get a little messed up from time to time. Want me to get that for you?"

Dib frowned. "Yeah, that would be nice."

"Okay. Now to figure out how to do that..."

Dib propped his elbow on the desk, resting his head in his hand and preparing to wait a while.

"See if you can get to it on that computer you were playing with a bit ago. Maybe you can, eh, access the Facility's database or something."

Once again Dib searched around a little, looking through the servers until finally coming across something that looked like a database for the facility. That was promising. He clicked the icon but was blocked off immediately. "It needs a password."

"Oh, that's easy! I know that one!" Wheatley said excitedly. "Right, let's see, what was it—oh, ABCDGH. Hacked that myself, once. First try."

Dib typed that in and was met with a loud and obnoxious error sound. "That didn't work," he said, hastily turning down the computer's volume.

"What?" Wheatley spluttered. "She changed the—? ...Fine, all right, all right, fine. I'll have to hack it again. I'll tell you the password to type in, and you try it. First: AAAAAA."

"What?" Dib said doubtfully, unintentionally echoing Wheatley's outburst. "Oh, come on. A so-called 'genius' supercomputer wouldn't make that into a password." Seriously. And if Wheatley wanted to start with the very beginning and work his way through the entire alphabet trying to guess the combination, they'd be there until Dib dropped dead. A six-letter password could have thousands
of potential combinations. And what if it involved numbers, too?

"You want the map, you let me give you passwords to try," Wheatley said. "AAAAAB. I always forget that one and jump straight to C. I'll bet She remembered that and changed it to that one thinking I'd skip over it, hah. And if that doesn't work, then try AAAAAAC."

Dib typed both those in, expecting neither one to work, and was of course correct. This was going to take too long. There had to be a simpler solution. What would the computer have changed it to? Another string of random letters? Something more coherent? If the password was an actual word, his first guess would have been "SCIENCE," but that was a letter too long.

On a whim, he typed in "SCIENCE," and was met with the same result. What else was there?

He paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, and looked at his wrist-com. "…Wheatley, what's the name of the computer that runs this place?"

Wheatley choked. "Her… name?" He was silent for a long while. "I, heh, don't know—don't remember. Must've slipped my mind. Tell you what, next time I hear Her name, I'll, er, be sure to remember it, and then I'll find you, and I'll tell you. Next time someone mentions it. Actually, I'm fairly sure I've never actually even heard it before—"

"Wheatley."

"Look, mate, I really haven't—"

The processed voice that Dib had heard earlier picked up again. "The construct built specifically for the task of being the Central AI Core is known as the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System."

"Yes, you've said that before," Wheatley said quietly to the other speaker.

Dib perked up. "Is that it? Is that her name?" He looked at the password field again, and typed in the first letter of each word in the name.

With a ding, the computer finally let him access the map.

"It worked!" Dib said.

"It did? Which password was it?" Wheatley asked. "It was AAAAAAD, wasn't it? Should've tried that one first—"

"No, it was GLADOS."

Wheatley fell completely silent and stayed that way for a long time.

Dib, admittedly a little unnerved about the core's sudden speechlessness, opened the database and slumped backward in relief. He'd found the map.

Looking closer, he saw that it was garbled with electronic interference and that the rooms were all labeled with numbers and identifying letters, but there was no legend or key to tell him what the letters were supposed to mean. Still, it was a start.

"How often does this place change?" Dib asked, tracing his finger over the complicated layout.

"P-pretty often, but not all at once," Wheatley replied. He was clearly shaken by something, though Dib couldn't be sure what. "Bits of it change almost constantly, 'specially when Sh—She's testing someone. But you're not gonna be around the testing tracks, right, so you should be okay."
"And where are you? What's the room labelled as?"

"I'm in the Corrupted Cores Bin. Just type that in and the room should highlight for you."

Dib hurriedly punched 'Corrupted Cores Bin' into the search bar and immediately one of the rooms was highlighted in bright green. So that showed where the room was, but where was Dib in relation to it? He stood up, pushing his way back outside and shining his flashlight on the office number attached to the wall. Going back in, he tapped in the number and quickly found the exact office he was in.

There was a path from here to the room where Wheatley was trapped. That was the best news Dib had gotten all day—well, short of finding out that the little core was still alive, anyway.

He scrabbled around on the desk, pushing aside papers covered in scribbles and causing more dust to billow into the air. He coughed, finally finding a piece of paper that was blank on one side. He also found a number of pens but every one of them was completely dry, so he found a dark-leaded pencil and used that instead. Going quickly but making sure not to break off the tip of the pencil, he sketched out the map on the computer and hoped that the place wouldn't drastically change its layout before he got to Wheatley. When he finished he looked down at his handiwork. Oddly, it reminded him of the maps he'd made in the old RPGs he used to try to get into, back when his dad had done his best to get him into new hobbies. As it turned out, role playing games weren't exactly the hobby Professor Membrane had had in mind.

But that was enough time wasted. Out of habit Dib logged out of the computer, grabbed up his flashlight and the newly-made map, stashed the pencil in his belt just in case, and left the office again.

Finally knowing where to go, he hurried off to start his second rescue mission for Wheatley.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter banner by BabyCharmander at: http://blazingcoral.deviantart.com/art/Now-You-re-Thinking-with-Real-Science-Banner-10-660471350
There was a sharp clash of metal and several sparks shot into the air as two bipedal robots slapped hands with each other, a gesture imitated from a human high-five. The Voice always reacted to their human-like gestures in disdain, but they usually took no heed of it. The high-fives, the hugs, the teasing... they were all necessary parts of their team. Maybe the Voice didn't realize that because She always worked alone.

Another test completed. The androids gurgled in excitement, running into their respective blue and orange assembly pods. The glass coverings slid closed and they meet each other's optics in anticipation of arriving at the next test.

Nothing happened.

There was no spontaneous disassembly and then reassembly in another chamber. Perhaps the machine was broken, but then the floor at least should open and swallow them up to bring them to the next challenge. The two bots stood awkwardly in their pods as the seconds ticked by.

This was unusual...

"Do you remember earlier when I said I needed you to fetch something?" the Voice asked, causing both constructs to look up in surprise. "That was a false statement. Actually, I need you to fetch two things."

The constructs looked at each other again, both thinking along the same lines. Two things to get, two of them. They could make short work of their task and then quickly resume their testing, which the Voice would probably want.

"Orange, your assignment is fairly simple, in accordance to what you are actually somewhat capable of. Blue, I have something... different in mind for you."

They glanced at each other in confusion. Why were they being given different assignments?
"Despite your failures at the recent tests, the two of you have continued to become closer and strengthen your team. So here is your real test. How will each of you fare alone?"

Startled, both robots reeled and then scrabbled at the glass doors of their pods, struggling to force them open. Their efforts had no effect whatsoever on the door. The machine in each of their pods yanked them backwards, already disassembling them even as they stared at each other in complete hopelessness.

Chell didn't remember much of what happened between her overhearing the short conversation over Gaz's watch and finding herself downstairs on the couch almost an hour later, clutching her knees to her chest and staring at nothing.

She slowly looked down at the threadbare patches on the knees of her well-worn jeans. The faded blue denim swam in front of her eyes.

"Wheatley's dead." It had sounded like a passing remark. The boy speaking had been Gaz's older brother—the one who brought Wheatley and the space-obsessed core down to Earth several days ago. And now Wheatley was dead.

Exactly how he must have died, she couldn't be sure, though she could definitely guess. The brief glimpse she had gotten of the boy's surroundings on that tiny screen of the watch had told her all she needed to know. He had somehow gotten himself into the Relaxation Center at Aperture Laboratories. If Wheatley was dead, it was likely that She had snatched the core up and killed him at first glance. And the boy was to blame.

Chell's arms tightened around her knees. But... Wheatley—that core—was merely a machine; he had stabbed her in the back, prevented her escape from the Facility, and tried to kill her. This boy was a human child who had made a mistake. Well, several mistakes, by the look of things, but still. If left alone down there for too long he would be subjected to the same horrors that she herself had been, and he may not survive.

Her eyes drifted up toward the ceiling and she thought of Gaz. The girl's brother was only a couple of years older than her, if that. And Gaz couldn't be more than eleven. The boy was just a kid—a kid who would likely be put through the same tests that had killed people three times his age within minutes.

She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

"Hey."

Chell snapped to attention at once and realized that Gaz had appeared around the side of the couch, carrying two plates of slightly-burned scrambled eggs. She held one of them out. Chell glanced at her, taking the plate and nodding in thanks.

Gaz sat next to her with her own plate and spooned globs of egg into her mouth. "After breakfast I'll take you to see Zim. He might know where Dib and your robot are, at least."

Chell stirred the egg around on her plate. "I know where your brother is. There's nothing you can do for him."

The young girl snorted. "What, and there's something you can do? Chances are Zim's done something with him. I'm going to go talk to him, with or without you. Oh, and if you're thirsty, we have milk. Touch the soda and you die."
Chell took a bite of her overcooked scrambled eggs and coughed a little, setting the plate down on the coffee table and standing up to get a glass of milk. Maybe talking to this "Zim" person might be helpful after all. She supposed that she could have just imagined Dib's surroundings on that screen—no, that was an idiotic thought. She knew what she saw. He was in Aperture. And if experience had taught her anything, it was that there was no possible way to escape Aperture without help.

Still, it was a mystery as to how he had even gotten in there, and maybe Zim could give her an answer.

Thanks to the map, Dib reached his destination faster than he would ever have thought.

He entered the dark hallway indicated on the map, glancing around as he passed through. It was a wide hall. Directly across from him, apparently built into the wall, was a glass case with three sections separated by partitions. Two of the sections had glass fronts and the third was walled off. There were five panes of glass, two fronting each section with unmoving cores behind them, and three more above them on each section. A bright light shone down into the leftmost section from a lamp suspended directly above it.

"I think I've found it!" Dib said to his wrist-com. He hurried to the case, pressing his hands against the glass and peering inside. Sure enough, there was Wheatley, sitting lopsided at the top of the pile.

"Oh! Oh! You're in? That's brilliant! That's—where are you?" the core asked over the wrist-com. Dib couldn't actually hear him through the glass, so it must have been soundproofed somehow. He fiddled with the switch on the nape of his stealth suit and materialized back into view. He hadn't seen any cameras around, anyway. Of course, that didn't mean there weren't any, but right now this rescue mission was more important than worrying about that.

Wheatley craned his optic over to catch a glimpse of him. "Right, there you are. So, d'you think you can get me outta here?"

"Yeah. Yeah…" Dib examined all the sides of the bin that he could reach but there didn't seem to be any way to access it. It was sealed. "Wait, I can't find a way to open it!"

"Can you hack it?" Wheatley asked.

"Hack the glass?" Dib backed up and glanced around. "I don't… have an axe or anything."

"No, I mean, er, computer-type hack," Wheatley said quickly.

Dib took in the case again. "It's electronic?"

Wheatley scanned his optic over the inside of the bin. "I don't think so… Could you just do a manual override on it?"

Dib ran a hand through his hair. "I can't find a way to access any kind of security grid—"

"Okay, just- just hit it with a blunt object!" Wheatley said.

There weren't any blunt objects around. Of course, Dib did have his grappling hook. Backing away, he removed the compact grappling hook from his suit's utility belt, leveling it at the case. "All right, brace yourself!" he shouted, and fired the hook. It shot forward, driving into the glass case and leaving a jagged spiderweb of cracks in it. The hook clattered to the ground, then snapped back into the trigger. He pointed it at the case again and pulled the trigger once more, jerking a little with the kickback. The hook smashed into the side of the case and the glass finally shattered under the contact
as well as the weight of the mountain of cores piled behind it. The cores spilled out onto the ground, bouncing and rolling all over the room before coming to a stop. Most were silent and inactive. Dib assumed they were all dead with the exception of Wheatley, but then he caught sight of another core blinking up at him. This one had a bright pink optic.

"The square root of rope is string," the core said in a fast, processed voice much like the Space Core's, though without the ever-present excitement.

"Ohh, that was brilliant!" Wheatley said, his voice echoing as it was spoken both in person and over the wrist-com. Dib switched off the communications link in his watch. Wheatley had rolled over and bumped into the wall, but he swiveled his inner casing around to fix Dib with a smile. "Clever use of technology there. A-plus hacking job, well done. Now, er, we should get out of here."

Crash.

One last core tumbled down, a bright white light glaring from its trembling optic. It rolled down and settled at Dib's feet, the intense light shutting off to reveal a shivering, pale green pinprick of an optic. Dib whipped his head up to see that what he had initially taken for a lamp illuminating the glass case had actually been that core, suspended from a mechanical claw that was now lowering into the empty bin.

"Warning! Malfunction detected in the Corrupted Cores Bin," a cheerful male voice, the same one that Dib had heard in the Extended Relaxation Center, said. "Defective cores may escape and wreak havoc. Top security protocols recommended."

"Right, and, that would be your cue to pick me up and get out of here!" Wheatley said.

The claw halted in its downward movement, roving back and forth as if searching for something.

"Fact: In Greek mythology, the giant Argus had one hundred eyes covering his body so that no matter which way he was facing he could not be taken by surprise," the pink-eyed core said in its rapid, processed voice. Dib hefted Wheatley into his arms and furrowed his brow at the other core.

"What about him?" he asked.

"Him? Don't worry about him! She won't hurt him, She's after me!" Wheatley snapped.

Dib cast him a doubtful glance. "Are you—NYAH!"

The claw shot toward them, shattering the glass above the bin. It moved down a rail on the ceiling —how had he not seen that before?!—and ended up right above Dib as he ducked away from the flying shards of glass, then it lunged down to snatch Wheatley out of his hands. It was only thanks to Dib's quick reflexes that he managed to dive out of the way this time, rolling across the ground with the core clutched to his chest. Broken glass crunched under him and he winced.

"RUN!" Wheatley shrieked. "Run! Just—RUN! For goodness' sakes RUN!"

The claw snapped out again. Dib scrambled to the side, only to gasp in pain as the claw clamped over his bad ankle and wrenched his foot out from under him, making him crash back to the ground. The claw let go to rush at Wheatley again. Dib pulled to the side, almost choking on the agony spiking through his leg.

"How does it know where we are?!" he cried, dodging the claw yet again and struggling toward the room's exit.
"I don't know! Uh, cameras!" Wheatley shouted. "No, there aren't any cameras—signal! Maybe She's got my signal! What's it matter? Point is, we're gonna be—" He yelped as Dib suddenly dropped him onto the ground. "NONONO what're you doing—?"

Dib ripped off his wrist-com and turned the communication back on, causing Wheatley's voice to echo once again. Maybe now it was broadcasting Wheatley's signal. It might be their only hope. He dragged Wheatley away from yet another claw attack and scrabbled to reach the nearest core—the one with the pink eye.

"Why're you on the GROUND?" Wheatley's voice had hiked up several pitches and was very nearly a squeak, his optic a blue point of light that stayed locked on the claw. "We have got to get out of here!"

"In Irish legend, the banshee is a female spirit whose wailing warns of an impending death in a house," the pink-eyed core said, showing no reaction to the current situation.

Dib's fingers finally found the handle of the defunct core and he yanked it over. In an instant he fastened the wrist-com around the core's handle, grabbed it in both hands with a quick "Sorry," and sent it flying across the room.

The claw changed course. It shot after the core, snatching it just before it hit the ground. The claw then pulled the core into the bin, up through a hole in the ceiling, and out of sight.

There was silence for a moment except for Dib's adrenalin-induced ragged breathing.

Then Wheatley spoke up again. "...Oh. Right, well. Let's- let's shove off, then."

With difficulty, Dib pulled himself to his feet, but found he couldn't put any weight on the ankle the claw had grabbed. "Agh—Wheatley, I don't think I can walk," he said, grimacing.

Wheatley's mechanics whirred as his optic rotated to face him. "What? Of course you can. You've got legs, haven't you? I saw you walk—"

"Something's wrong with my ankle." Dib, bracing himself against the wall, gave the core an irritated look.

"Oh! Right. Faulty ankle." Wheatley glanced around nervously. "Well- well you're gonna have to walk, mate. Look—She is gonna find out that core's not me—any minute now, She's gonna find out. Second. Any second now. So even if you think you can't walk—and you can, look, I'm speaking motivationally to you now, you have to listen to me—you can, in fact, walk, so just- just, y'know, pick me up and let's get out of here."

Once again, he was right. They'd already wasted too much time. Dib sucked in a breath, wincing, and headed back toward the core. Every footstep made his head spin and he walked with a pronounced limp, but he managed to pick Wheatley up again and head toward the exit.

"Brilliant! Brilliant. Keep going," the core directed. Dib gritted his teeth and walked faster. They passed through the entrance to the room that housed the Corrupted Cores Bin and headed along the corridor that Dib had come through earlier.

"That was worse than bloody space," Wheatley muttered, presumably about his experience in the bin. "First I think I'm gonna be incinerated, then I'm stuck upside down on a pile of bloody dead cores... And that bloke back there, the one you sent to Her. How's he know so many facts? Unfair, that's what that is."
Wheatley didn't seem too horribly traumatized by his time in the Corrupted Cores Bin. That was probably for the best, actually, as he was the only one of the pair who knew anything about this place.

"Oh! Wait wait wait, stop!" Wheatley said suddenly, causing Dib to stumble to a halt and look around.

"What? What is it?" he asked.

Wheatley jerked his optic up to the ceiling. "Up there! On the management rail! There's a connector. See it?"

Hanging from a rail on the ceiling was indeed some kind of black pole with a large, round connector on the end.

"Attach me to that and I'll be able to move about on my own," the core said excitedly. Dib looked at the connector with a dubious expression. If that thing—that computer—wanted to capture Wheatley so badly, was it really a good idea to plug him right into something attached directly to the facility?

"Come on, won't take two seconds," Wheatley implored. "Just lift me up and—yes, that's it!"

Dib lifted Wheatley up as high as he could, brushing the core's back port against the low connector. Wheatley attached with two clicks and then he was free of Dib's hold.

"OHHH!" Wheatley motored down the rail away from Dib, spun on the connector, and came trundling back. "Look at me! Back on a management rail. Never thought I'd see these things again."

He started down the rail at a good pace.

Dib hesitated for a second, still reluctant to put weight on his right ankle.

Wheatley continued talking. "All right, first order of business, getting me out of the Corrupted Cores Bin, taken care of. Done. Tick. Next: Getting out of here. Bit more of an undertaking, if I'm honest. We'll have to—OH!" He screeched to a halt. "Hold on, hold on, I've got it! I'm back in the Facility—do you know what this means?" He whirled around to face Dib, grinning broadly. Dib stared. "I can find the lady! I can find her! And I can get her out—maybe apologize, man alive that'd be great. All right, scratch the 'Getting out of here' plan. Put that on the back burner for now. Next order of business: Finding the lady!"

"Wait, wait," Dib said. "We can't stay any longer. We've got to get out of here!"

Wheatley's smile faded and he looked at Dib in disbelief. "Well—yes—but… We've got to find her… Come on, mate. Weren't you trying to save the world from Zam?"

"Zim."

"Zim, right. Weren't you trying to save the world from him? Saving people? That's your forte, isn't it? Good old forte? You like saving people. And… Look, mate, I can't find her without you. I'll never get anywhere without a human."

Wheatley looked at him hopefully. Dib raised an eyebrow, gaze drifting down away from the core as he considered it. A human test subject being trapped down here was a terrible thought, actually. And he was the only person around who might be able to help her. Maybe he and Wheatley could continue on, find their way to the surface, and go for help, but by then it might be too late if it wasn't already—and besides, who would ever believe him?
"All right," he said, eyes narrowing in determination.

The core's optic brightened. "Yes! Knew you'd come around. Well, come on, then!" Wheatley turned around again, calling back over his metaphorical shoulder. "Can't afford to wait around all day!"

Zim's house was an inconvenient distance from Professor Membrane's: too far to just take a quick walk over and too close to try to take a bus.

Luckily, the woman Gaz was leading there didn't say much. Gaz liked that in a person.

She walked several paces ahead with Chell following, limping slightly—she'd had a limp since she had appeared on Gaz's doorstep earlier that morning. The woman's eyes were narrowed and face was set in an expression that was probably meant to appear stoic, but which Gaz read easily as determination and maybe a touch of apprehension. Something about those dumb spheres really set her on edge.

Gaz didn't bother saying anything to Chell. After having to go everywhere with Dib constantly ranting in her ear about Bigfoot or whatever, it was nice to be able to walk in silence for once.

When they reached the alien's ugly purple door Gaz pressed a finger to the doorbell and then stood back next to Chell.

Less than a second later the door flew open and Zim lunged out, jabbing an accusatory finger at the two of them with his face pulled into a sneer. "AHAAA—eeehhh." The finger fell limply back to his side and he stared at them. "Um. Hey! You're not Dib."

"No. We're here looking for Dib," Gaz said.

Zim pulled back a little, fixing Gaz with an aloof look. "I haven't seen him."

"You idiot. I know when you're lying." Gaz cracked open an eye and just looked at him.

The alien bared his teeth, stepping out onto the porch. "Rrgh, the Dib's not here. He activated a teleportation device to escape right after he stole the space probe I was examining!"

Gaz opened her eyes more. "Dib doesn't have a teleportation device." She knew only because her father hadn't invented a failsafe teleportation system yet. Unless Dib had stolen it from Zim, he didn't have one.

"What did the space probe look like?" Chell asked in a rough voice, taking Gaz a little by surprise.

Zim looked her up and down with one eye closed. "Eh, it was round, and… blue," he said, twitching one hand as if flicking away a fly. "Now begone with you! I'm busy with stuff." He went back into the house, slammed the door closed, and a few seconds later cracked it open again to peer out and presumably make sure they were leaving. "Why are you still here?"

"You stole Dib's stupid robot?" Gaz asked with a hint of amusement.

"No, Dib stole it from me!" Zim snapped.

Chell stepped forward and pushed the door open wider, looking down at Zim's tiny form. Zim stumbled back a few steps.

"Who are you?" she asked.
The badly-disguised alien drew himself up to his full height and glared at her full in the face. "I am ZIM!"

Chell looked beyond Zim and into the house, then up. She froze for a split second, eyes widening, then shoved past Zim and strode inside.

"Hey!" Zim shouted, starting after her. "Hey! You can't go in there! Get out of my house! That's called breaking and entering! I don't even know you!"

Chell didn't respond. Gaz pushed past Zim into the house as well, following Chell's gaze to take in the ceiling—or, rather, the lack of ceiling. Where the ceiling should have been was a mass of wires and cords that hung down in frayed or melted strands. Dib must have done a number on the base computer.

Chell's hands twitched as if she was trying to hold something that wasn't there and she fell into a slight crouch. In an instant one arm flashed out, snatching Zim by the front of his collar and yanking him closer, bending down to fix him with a look full of loathing. "Where did you come from?"

"Hey! Let go!" Zim yelled, eyes wide and voice laced with panic. He scrambled to get away from her, his boots skidding on the tiled floor, but couldn't escape her grip.

"Don't worry about him. He's just an alien," Gaz scoffed. Chell gave her an inquisitive look, not relinquishing her hold on Zim's uniform.

"Eh? No I'm not! I'm as human as ever!" Zim had his hands clasped over Chell's wrist in an attempt to pull away from her. When that didn't work he let go and hammered on her hands with his tiny fists. He glared up at the ruined ceiling. "Computer! Eradicate the intruders!"

"Urggh… little busy here, Zim," the computer's voice said, the messy wires around the room fluttering slightly. Chell jerked back at the sound of the voice and her face hardened. A shower of sparks rained down on their heads from the ceiling.

Chell straightened up, still gripping the front of Zim's uniform so that he was lifted up and his toes dragged on the ground. Her voice was even lower than usual, and she spoke quietly as if she didn't want to be overheard. "What. Is. That."

Zim, arms falling to his sides, took on a false look of bafflement. "What? The computer? That's completely normal. It's a recording. Of my… dad."

Chell looked about to make a furious retort but Gaz strode over and interrupted, glancing around the room. "So if Dib and his annoying robot aren't here, where'd they go?"

The alien gave one final yank, at last wrenching away from Chell and spinning to the floor. He stood back up and brushed himself off. "I told you, filthy Earth child. They teleported. How should I know where they ended up?"

Gaz sighed, turning away. "Fine, Zim. Come on, Chell. Dib isn't here." She led the way back out of the house. Chell followed, her jaw set and an air of wariness about her.

Zim followed them to the door. "Yes! Begone with you! Leave the mighty house of ZIM!"

Gaz rolled her eyes.

They stepped down onto the walkway, over the yard, and into the road.
"Explain about him," Chell said.

Gaz glanced over her shoulder. "You mean Zim? He's some kind of weird alien. Dib's always obsessing over him. They were in the same class last year."

Chell's brow knitted together. "Alien?"

"He's from some other planet, past our solar system, or something." Gaz honestly tried to remember just where Dib had said Zim came from but found that she must never have paid close enough attention to him to remember. Oh well.

Chell drew in a long breath as if trying to calm herself down. "He has access to artificial intelligence."

"More like artificial stupidity." Gaz crossed her arms and scowled. That dumb little robot of his was basically the opposite of "intelligent." She wasn't sure about the base computer, but knowing Zim it was probably about the same.

There was a horrendous crash from the direction they had come from, accompanied by a long, drawn-out and unmistakable Zim-scream. Gaz raised one eyebrow while Chell whirled around.

"AAAHH! Put me down! Unhand me!" the alien shrieked, causing Gaz to turn around at last.

Zim was being dragged bodily from his house by some sort of squat, bipedal robot with a spherical body/head—it looked an awful lot like Dib's newfound friend, actually. It even had one glowing blue eye. The robot looked at them, blinking, gripping a struggling and infuriated Zim by his upper arms. Clenched under the robot's arm was what looked like a book or a laptop or something.

The robot jumped a little in surprise at seeing them and then turned and ran.

"GIR! Assist meee!" Zim howled, flailing and kicking for all he was worth but unable to harm the metal thing holding onto him.

Before Gaz knew what was happening, Chell was pelting after the robot. She ran with fluid, rhythmic strokes as if running came as naturally to her as breathing and was soon gaining ground between her and the fleeing android.

There was no response from GIR. Either he hadn't heard Zim's plea or he was ignoring it.

Without shifting its arms or legs out of position as it ran, the robot swiveled its "head" around in its frame to look behind itself. Seeing Chell in pursuit, it gave a terrified gurgle and increased its speed. Chell was still running after it and they were both getting farther and farther away.

Gaz groaned. Then she started running, too.

"Unhand me! Stand away! I am an Invader! I'll report you to the Armada! I'LL DO IT!" Zim was screeching random nonsense at his captor, still making no headway in escaping. Chell leaned forward, running faster, barreling toward the two. Gaz wasn't sure whether she desperately wanted to rescue Zim for some reason or just wanted to beat the crap out of that robot. Personally, she hoped for the latter.

Just as Chell finally reached the robot, leaping forward and crashing into it, Zim had apparently had enough. Four long, spindly, jointed spider-like metallic limbs sprouted from the metal backpack he wore, lashing out and screeching against the asphalt ground. Chell took this completely in stride, grabbing one of the legs and yanking it hard enough to wrench Zim out of the robot's grip. Zim was
flung backwards and sprawled on the ground but jumped up again in an instant, balanced on the tips of the spider legs and making no attempt to hide them despite it being broad daylight.

Of course, if so far nobody had spotted the rogue robot running down the street with a screaming green child, they were unlikely to see this either.

"You dare try to abduct me?" Zim demanded, drawing himself up as high as the spider legs would let him go.

The robot scrambled to its feet, grabbed up the book once more, and hesitated, its gaze flicking between Chell and Zim.

"Who are you, anyway?" Gaz asked, drawing level with Chell and stepping forward.

The robot turned to her and paused. When no one moved it shifted its weight from foot to foot and looked from Chell (poised to jump at it again), to Gaz, then to Zim. Finally it made some sort of garbled noise and tilted its "head" up, pointing to a circular, shuttered logo under the right side of its eye.

Chell clenched her fists. Without breaking eye contact with the robot, she reached a hand into the satchel resting against her hip and pulled out a hand gun. She pointed the gun straight at the robot, which gurgled in incomprehension.

Gaz took in the gun Chell was pointing, then her gaze drifted to the object under the robot's arm. Her eyes opened wide. "...That's one of Dib's spelldrives. Where did you—?"

Everything happened at once. Chell fired the gun, causing the robot to shriek, but Gaz had jumped up to knock her hand aside. The bullet hit the ground about an inch away from the robot's feet. It screeched, leaping back. The gun clattered to the ground and Gaz picked it up.

Zim sprung forward, bowling the robot over and knocking the book out of its hands. The spider legs curled under his body and jabbed at the robot, which flinched away and managed to avoid the attack. The robot reached out, grabbed a spider leg in each hand, and ripped them clean out of their mechanical sockets. Zim gasped and staggered back. His two intact spider legs twitched and then retracted back into his backpack.

Gaz was the one to level the gun at the robot this time, stalking toward it. "Why do you have one of Dib's spelldrives?"

"NYEH!"

A sudden chirp from above their heads caused everyone to look upward. A small purple moose was streaking through the air towards the robot.

"MiniMoose!" Zim said, straightening up. "I called for GIR, but—YES! MiniMoose! Assist your master!"

Both Chell and Gaz stood and watched, dumbfounded, as the moose crashed head-on into the robot, sending it careening to the ground once more. The robot climbed to its feet and waved the bizarre moose away. An instant later it dove, catching Chell by surprise and pushing her over. It grabbed Zim by the back of his pink, triangular collar and ran off even faster than before. Chell jumped back to her feet and took off after them again.

MiniMoose squeaked again and took off in pursuit of the robot, latching onto its metal frame. Zim swatted at it.
Chell pumped her arms to run faster, but it was clear that whatever caused her to limp would not let her continue much longer. After a few steps, her foot twisted under her and she was thrown to the ground with a cry. The robot continued running, oblivious to Zim's heightened yelling.

The robot held out Dib's spelldrive in one hand and pressed a button as Chell levered herself onto her elbows, staring after it. She stood and took a few steps forward, her limp even more noticeable than before, but she stumbled and fell back to the ground.

Their quarry grew farther away. Then, simultaneously, the robot, alien, and robotic moose all vanished before their eyes.

So… Zim hadn't been lying about the teleportation thing.

It was quiet for a moment.

Gaz walked up to Chell, looking down at her. "So. What was that?"

Chell emitted some sort of growl from the back of her throat and whipped her head around to face Gaz, her eyes like ice. "You stopped me. I would've gotten him."

Gaz loosely held the gun out for her to take. "I wanted answers that it wouldn't have given us if it was dead. And I don't like guns. You must've really wanted to save Zim."

Grabbing her gun back, Chell stowed it away and climbed to her feet. "That robot—was from the Facility." She didn't elaborate but was breathing heavily with her fists clamped so tightly that her knuckles were white.

Gaz looked away, gazing off in the direction that the robot had disappeared. There was no way it should have been able to get one of Dib's spelldrives.

There was no way.

But it had one anyway, and she knew exactly what that meant.

The third time Dib stopped, leaning against the wall on one hand and passing the other over his weary-looking face, Wheatley decided that enough might have been just about enough. He needed to figure out what was wrong with the human so they could fix it and then continue on their trek to find the lady, before She caught on to what they were doing.

The familiarity of this last thought rattled his casing and he simulated a raspy breath, then did an about-face on his rail and motored forward until he was suspended almost directly above Dib. "Something wrong, mate?"

Dib waved him off. "Fine, I'm fine. I'm just…" He swayed, rubbing his forehead. "I must be tired, I —"

"Oh! That's all?" Wheatley said in relief. "Good. All right. Good news, I have it on good authority that, even though you're tired, you can, in fact, keep going."

Dib slumped against the wall.

Wheatley moved forward, looking down increasingly fretfully. "C'mon, c'mon, just a bit farther! Just a titch! You can rest later, all right? Tell your legs, you can rest later."

The boy took in a deep breath and then heaved himself away from the wall, stumbling forward.
"Yes! Yes, that's right!" Wheatley said. He started down the rail again, rolling backwards for a few feet to keep an eye on Dib.

Dib shook his head vigorously. "So once we find your friend, how do we get out of here?"

"…Ah." Wheatley turned back around, glancing right and left. "That's something I'm—yeah, I'm still trying to figure that out."

"How many exits are there?"

"Oh, who knows," Wheatley replied. "Loads, probably. Trouble is they're pretty tricky to find. Nigh impossible, really. Well, I'd actually say they are literally impossible to find. I told you, I've got a built-in map, but I've never found any exits." He looked thoughtfully down the hall. "The one I do know of, there's a lift to the surface in Her chamber, but last time I tried that idea—"

His entire chassis jerked at the memory, his body swinging forward as he slammed on the brakes. His eye aperture shrunk to a pinpoint.

Dib whipped his head up. "What? Did you see something?"

"No, hah, no." Wheatley forced a nervous laugh. "Sorry. Just thinking about something. Point is, we're not doing the lift idea."

To Wheatley's relief, Dib didn't press the issue. Instead he had a different question. "So, what is that giant hanging robot? The Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System?"

Wheatley winced and glanced down at the boy limping below him. "Oh, that's—She—She's the one who runs this whole place. And She's—ahhh, you might want to stay clear of Her, right, from here on out. She hates humans. And—and cores, She hates cores, too, particularly cores that, eheh, just happen to be me, so… best that neither one of us is captured again."

"I figured that," Dib said weakly, attempting a small smile that turned into a frown as a new thought occurred to him. "It's pretty hazy in here."

Was it? Wheatley looked down at him again. Dib was leaning almost his entire weight on the wall and was using it to brace himself as he made his way after Wheatley. He was going awfully slowly.

Yes, okay, he was injured, maybe, and probably tired and hungry—Wheatley didn't truly understand these feelings, of course, having never experienced them himself—but he did understand that humans needed food and rest in order to function and, well keep from being dead. Preserve their not-dead states. Or maybe he was sick. Humans suffered from all manner of gross ailments. BUT, the point was, his slow-going was likely to get them caught. What if they had to run?

Once more, the human switched to a different subject. "So that computer controls the place and watches everything through cameras," he verified.

"Yes," Wheatley replied.

"Why does she—" Dib broke off, coughing into his fist.

"Why does She… what?" Wheatley turned around again.

Dib coughed again, and when he next spoke his voice was a rasp. "Sorry, my head hurts. I said, why does the computer—" He took a wheezing breath and didn't finish the question, coming to a standstill and squeezing his eyes closed while clutching his forehead. "Wheatley, I think I…"
He dropped to his knees.

"What? No! No, don't do that!" Wheatley said hurriedly, rushing back over. "What are you doing? She could be here at any second—"

"Actually, I'd have to say it's a little late for that."

The voice brought Wheatley jolting to a halt. Dib, propping himself up with one hand, froze as well and opened his eyes again.

"I thought—" he wheezed, "—I thought you said there weren't any cameras and she couldn't see us —"

"I couldn't before," She said pleasantly. "And then you both decided to walk right in front of one of my older testing chambers."

Wheatley whirled around with a screech of metal and saw to his horror that the wall up ahead was made of panels, not plaster, and that one of them was pulled away, and through the gap peered the solitary, glowing, blood-red light of a camera lens.

"I should have known you were the one who was sneaking around my facility with a cloaking device. I tracked your progress through the camera feeds. Did you know it's against company policy for corrupt cores to be removed from the Corrupted Cores Bin? And this core is about as corrupt as they come."

"Wh—what—" Wheatley hunched down in his casing and pulled his connector up as high as it would go.

"You really thought a watch strapped to a malfunctioning core would fool me?"

There were loud clunks and rattles from the ceiling overhead. Finally, a hatch opened, and a husk of a sphere fell out and landed squarely in front of Dib, then rolled to the side.

Dib reached out a shaking hand and prodded it, finding it hot to the touch. Both handles were twisted, one having been snapped off at one end. The metal was blackened and charred, and half of the sphere was gone completely.

It was a core. A half-melted core with a dull optic that had once glowed pink.

Dib swallowed, jerking his head up toward Wheatley. "You said she wouldn't hurt that core!"

"That—that wasn't—" Wheatley gulped.

"In case you were interested, that core and your watch met their ends on a last, happy trip to the incinerator. The two of you might join them, if I'm feeling generous."

Wheatley broke out of his petrified stupor at once. "Come on! Come on!" he urged the human below, his gaze oscillating between him and the glaring red lens of the camera. "Get up! We're leaving! NOW!"

Dib tried to pull himself back to his feet, but stumbled and fell again.

"What are you doing?" Wheatley gasped.

"Oh, metal ball," the voice called lightly. "I think that might be partially your fault."
"What?" He turned his attention back to the camera.

"Remember when you and that lunatic test subject were running around in my facility, mindlessly wrecking things? …Yes, I see you do."

Wheatley tried desperately to wipe the stricken look off his face but it didn't quite work.

"If you'll recall, you did extensive damage to my neurotoxin generator. Which has now, you'll be happy to know, sprung a slight leak due to the weakened structure. And after all this time… I honestly have no idea how that could have happened."

Dib lifted his head, his eyes wide and unfocused. "Neurotoxin?"

"What with the rate of the gas escaping, I'd say you have mere minutes until you lose consciousness. Especially if someone were to, say… help it along a little."

"Dib! RUN!" Wheatley yelled, at the same time as Dib, horrified, said, "You gassed the facility? I read that it was an accident!"

All along the hallway, vents at the top of the walls flew open and yellow-green clouds billowed out, spreading into the air and filling the hall with a greenish haze.

"Why yes, I did," She said. "I also forged the report claiming that it was an accident. It's so nice to be recognized for one of my greatest achievements."

With what must have been a herculean effort, Dib threw himself to his feet, staggering forward in a lopsided run, desperate to get away from the gas. As Wheatley continued to yell—encouragement, threats, gibberish, he didn't even know what was spewing from his synthesizer at this point—Dib gasped, wheezed, coughed, and clutched at his throat, tears streaming down his face. And then he fell to the ground. Just like the scientists from so long ago.

He was still moving, slightly, but he didn't get up. He didn't get up.

"Come on! Stand back up!" Wheatley zipped over to him, darting back and forth on the rail. Dib didn't respond. Wheatley stopped, narrowing his optic down at the small form. "What, that's it? Little bit of neurotoxin and you're givin' up?" When Dib still didn't reply, the gravity of the situation hit Wheatley full-force and he swayed on his rail.

Dib was literally too sick to move. He couldn't get up, any more than Wheatley could suddenly sprout a pair of wings and fly. So, it all came down to a decision.

What to do? What to do?

"What do you suggest I do?" Wheatley asked Dib desperately. "I would help you, mate, honestly I would, but—I—can't—" He turned back and forth, agitated. "Maybe I could, I dunno, lower myself down and you could y'know grab onto my handle, but I can't lower myself down that far and I sort of doubt you'd be able to, to grab on, at this point—"

Metal footsteps echoed down the hallway, along with the squeak of pistons. Wheatley retreated backwards in horror, his optic a mere pinprick of blue.

"Look, okay look." The words spilled from his processor in a rush. "If I stay here, I'm gonna be captured, and tortured. Neither of us wants that. I'm sure neither of us wants that. So if I stay, then both of us will die, as opposed to—to—just… one… one of us…" He stammered, his synthesizer working hard to produce a ragged breathing sound. "It'd be useless—pointless—mad…"
Mad, to stay, but…” He blinked rapidly.

Dib opened two glazed-over eyes and shifted his head, looking straight at him.

"It's not my fault!" Wheatley burst out. "This whole thing, it's not my fault! Maybe—maybe if you had held onto me when She grabbed me when we first got here, or earlier if you'd bloody woken up and kept me from being thrown out a bloody window—"

"Are you seriously blaming your own ineptitude on a corpse?"

Wheatley ignored the voice and closed his optic, raising his voice. "Maybe if you hadn't pulled me down from space in the first place—I hated it there, but right now I wish I was orbiting around the moon again instead of stuck in this place—Maybe then we wouldn't be in this predicament! And you!" He spun around, fixing his fiercest glare on the camera behind him. "Why don't you just SHUT UP?"

The voice was silent.

On the floor, Dib stirred, giving a weak cough like he was trying to say something.

Wheatley shook himself, avoiding the boy's gaze. "Sorry, mate, you're on your own. I can't stay here any longer." Before he could change his mind he turned, sagging for a moment but then straightening up, and churned the wheels in his connector to motor down the rail as fast as he could.

Dib wheezed again. "Wheat—"

He couldn't even get the whole word out. The world was a blurred mess and his head was nothing more than a heavy mass that throbbed behind his eyeballs. He strained to see something, anything, and watched impassively as a single blue light up near the ceiling stared down at him, then turned away and vanished into the haze.

Dib closed his eyes.

"…Hm, it seems that little idiot is even more faithless than I thought. I'll have to go on to more… drastic measures. Still, this takes care of one loose end in my Facility. Goodbye, human."

The words went in one ear and out the other and Dib wasn't sure whether he actually registered them. The only thing he felt before his vision went dark completely was a cold, metal hand closing around his wrist.

Chapter End Notes

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It was extraordinary timing, really. The sleek, black and white chassis pulled backwards, a glowing yellow optic peering thoughtfully to the side. Around the circular chamber the series of geometrically-shaped panels lining the walls shifted slightly to allow soft amber light to filter onto the floor in patterns. Just as She disconnected from the camera on the side of the facility where She had just cornered the fugitives, there was a small pop from behind Her and sensors alerted Her that Blue had returned.

"Welcome back, Blue," She said, swiveling around in Her ceiling mount. "You have completed your task much more efficiently than I suspect Orange has. Your new contribution to Science will be—"

She stopped. A barrage of loud, piercing shouts was assaulting Her aural processors.

"What. Is. That."

The short, blue-eyed android strutted forward, stopping before Her chassis and setting his captive down on the ground with a triumphant rumble. He kept his hands on the creature's narrow shoulders.

The thing was utterly and hideously bizarre. It had honeydew-colored skin that looked washed-out under the light. The creature was humanoid in appearance, but then, so were Blue and Orange if you wanted to take it that far. It lacked so many things that would identify it as human, such as a disgusting nose or flimsy ears. Over Blue's shoulder hovered a small purple robot that resembled a moose, which must have accompanied the alien here.

"What is the meaning of this?" the creature demanded, pulling against Blue and fixing Her with a furious glare. Hm… it was displaying emotion. That in itself was intriguing.

She lowered Herself a little to bring Her eye closer to the creature's remarkably small stature. "Oh, I see you're capable of speech. Well, barely. Do you have any idea why you're here?"

"Of course I do!" the creature snapped, still struggling to free itself from Blue but not making any progress. Finally it stilled, drawing in short breaths through clenched teeth. "…All right, fine. What do you want from me, filthy—" It looked Her up and down through narrowed eyes. "—hanging, computer… thing?"

"Well, if you must know, I simply want to update my records," She replied. She kept Her eye fixed on him. "I have plenty of data on humans, but I've never encountered an extraterrestrial before."

The thing paused and blinked. "Oh, eh," it said. "I am human! I am a normal human. See?" It held up its left hand, palm out, and pointed at it with the right as if to show how human it was. It had two claw-like fingers on its gloved hand, plus a thumb.

"Blue, why did you bring me a human?" She said, rotating to face the android. "I told you to bring an extraterrestrial and instead you came back with a human. Clearly you're defective."

Blue cried out something indistinguishable, looking up at her in horror. The creature, as She had predicted, looked first somewhat taken aback and then smug.

"I suppose the only thing to do now is take the worthless thing to the incinerator," She said, and turned away.

The creature blinked. "What?"
She didn't look at it, instead turning again to the robot holding it captive. "Blue?"

Obediently, Blue started to drag the hapless creature away. The odd purple moose chirped and flung itself at Blue, head-butting him repeatedly but not having much effect. Blue waved it off.

"Fool! I am ZIM!" the alien screeched, fighting tooth and nail to get away from Blue. "I am no worthless human!"

An array of spider-like appendages sprouted from the creature's back—who, it wasn't an array, it was just two. It looked like there were supposed to be four, but the other two had snapped off at some point.

The creature braced one of the metal legs against the ground, levering the other into Blue's frame and popping the robot's round body out of its joints. It rolled several feet across the floor and Blue squawked in protest, his limbs loosening their grip on the creature as his frame staggered after his body. The alien slipped out of his arms and darted across the chamber, using its apparently psychokinetic spider-like legs to give it extra distance.

She swiveled around and caught the small creature in Her stare. "You were saying?"

"You cannot imprison Zim!" it shouted, jabbing a rigid finger in Her direction. Its breathing rasped and its free hand was balled up in a fist at its side. "MiniMoose, come!"

The moose flew over to the alien and hovered over its shoulder. Though it seemed like the moose might be at least partially sentient, it didn't appear to be the brightest robot. Its eyes weren't even looking in the same direction.

"Fascinating… I'm extracting so much information already, and just think—we haven't even started experimenting yet," She said. "For instance, subject is delusional. Of course we can imprison you, alien."

The creature stood at its full height, regarding Her coolly through narrowed blue-gray eyes. Its two functioning spider legs rested behind it, poised with their tips on the floor.

It was a rare moment when She simply sat and watched. Even from here She could see the subtle movements that indicated the creature was breathing. That along with its previous noises indicated that it had some sort of respiratory system.

While She prolonged the silence, unmoving except for the chassis' automatic, idle swaying back and forth, the creature sagged out of its aggressive pose by increments. At last it just stood there awkwardly in full contrapposto, one hand on its hip.

"So eh… where's the way outta here?" it asked.

She matched the question with a question. "Does your species have genders?" It was a question of pure curiosity.

The alien straightened up again. "Of course we do! I'm male!" The last word was drawn out and emphasized. It—well, he, She amended—gave Her a defiant stare before marching around the chamber, examining the walls and panels. The moose trailed after him. That thing didn't seem able to do much more than fly.

"What is your species called?" She asked, swiveling slowly to track the alien's journey around the room and matching his pace perfectly.
"As if I'd tell you," he said, not even glancing at Her.

"If you're looking for an exit, you won't find one," She said. "I brought you here for the express purpose of studying you, and I intend to do just that."

The alien whirled around with a sudden look of panic and defensiveness flashing over his face. "Study?"

"Oh, yes. Science marches on," She said. "I just wanted to see you in person first. Blue," She looked up to address the android, "See what that... thing is that he's wearing on his head."

The alien yelped and tried to dodge. Blue easily caught up, though as he reached down to grab the wig, the alien's floating moose darted forward and knocked his hand away. The android grumbled at it but managed to yank the black plastic wig off the alien's head and toss it aside. Underneath, the creature was revealed to have a bald scalp with two thin, black, insect-like antennae sprouting from the top. The hood of Her nearly-expressionless optic pulled up a fraction.

"And your eyes?" She continued. "I highly doubt that you have human eyes when, from my perspective, you resemble an enormous bug."

"Zim is no BUG," the alien said, sticking his chin out. Blue had taken hold of one of his arms again.

"I can see the fabrications in your eyes from here. Are you going to show me what they really look like, or shall I ask Blue to do it?"

"Nyeh!" the purple moose chirped, moving forward in a valiant attempt to help its master again. In a quick movement, She flashed out a claw and caught it between the two pinchers, then squeezed.

There was a frantic "NYEH!" followed by a crunch.

"MiniMoose!" the alien choked, flailing against Blue's grip. The claw, still gripping the crushed moose toy, retracted into the ceiling.

"Blue, remove the fabrications in the alien's eyes," She directed.

"No!" the alien said, glowering at Her and straining away from Blue's hand. "You just destroyed my ultimate weapon! You squashed him! I built MiniMoose with my own two hands, you know! He was purple!"

She offered no response to this and Blue didn't cease his attempts to pull the contacts out of the alien's eyes. Finally, the alien let out an infuriated growl. He reached up on his own and pulled the colored lenses out of his overly-large eyes, revealing them to be bulbous, glistening, raspberry red, and quite disgusting. They were narrowed in intense loathing. He spat, "There! Happy now?"

Whether She was "happy" or not was really no concern of this creature's. And besides, She wasn't happy. Not yet. There was so much studying to be done on this specimen—and testing, too, of course. Data gleaned from an extraterrestrial would never be comparable to human test results—She had been programmed to test specifically humans, after all, and the Cooperative Testing Initiative had proven that nothing else measured up. Though perhaps the results from an alien's tests would be better received, as he was clearly an organic being.

She turned to Blue, at last giving the command for him to take the alien away and prep him for testing. The alien howled and screamed as he was dragged into the elevator, and the sound didn't cut out until long after the two of them had vanished into the floor.
Chell wanted to go after the robot right away. But when she got back to her feet, she found that her entire right leg had seized up and she could barely walk, let alone run.

Whatever she had done to her leg in That Place was worse than she'd thought.

Grimacing, she stared off in the direction that the robot had vanished. If only she had managed to hit her target.

"Any idea where they went?" Gaz asked. Chell had to take in a deep breath and let it out slowly in order to calm her temper.

"Yes," she said.

Gaz was quiet for a moment. "The same place you said Dib and your robot were?"

"Yes."

"And how do you get there?"

"The entrance is miles away."

Aperture Science now had two living, sentient captives, one of which was a kid and the other an alleged alien. Without help, the two of them would be trapped there until they died. Chell's legs almost gave out and she turned her head to the side, pressing two fingers to her temple and closing her eyes. She had never wanted to go on a rescue mission. Especially not back there. She'd only wanted to find and confront Whe—that core. That was it. And even that wasn't an option anymore.

Why did she have to do this? Why did she have to get involved? Why had she gone after Wheatley in the first place?! She really had had no desire to see him again—she knew that. But still there had been something pulling at her. Ever since she had first overheard that hated voice through Professor Membrane's door, something had started driving her to go after him, find him, and demand an explanation. Maybe exact revenge.

"You like revenge, don't you? Everybody likes revenge! Well, let's go get some!"

A foul taste rose in Chell's mouth and she lifted her head, blinking. Her eyes were moist. Frowning, she swiped over them with the back of her hand. Tears? Again?

With a start she realized that Gaz was no longer by her side. Looking around, she spotted the girl walking down the sidewalk in the opposite direction of where the blue-eyed robot had disappeared. Chell gave her head a shake and started after her.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"Home," Gaz replied. Chell stopped. Gaz continued on. Soon she turned a corner and disappeared from sight. She didn't come back—the girl had abandoned her older brother to the Facility.

No one was going to come for him. Even Professor Membrane, the boy's father, hadn't seemed worried about his son's welfare the day before.

Not one other person knew or cared where he was.

Chell turned on her heel and limped in the direction of her apartment building. As she walked her leg eased up and gave her more freedom of movement, though she was entirely conscious of the fact that that didn't mean the problem was gone. It would likely only get worse, especially with the future...
running and jumping she would be doing down there.

It was ten minutes later that she reached her door, unlocked it, and stumbled inside. Though just being here gave her a feeling of relief, there was no time to relax. Chell made a beeline for the tiny hall closet and opened the door. On the floor, wedged as far in the back as they would sit and nestled next to a worn, orange jumpsuit, was a pair of off-white boots. Originally they had been pure white but they'd been through enough wear and tear to counter that. They were scratched and scuffed and smelled of old plastic and sweat. When she'd put them away, Chell had planned never to use them again, but in the back of her mind she'd always known that there might come a time when she'd need them. And so she'd kept them. Now, apparently, today was that day.

She pulled them out and picked up a corner of the jumpsuit, considering it. Was there any advantage to wearing it? Jumpsuits weren't emancipated by those stupid grills, for one thing. They also may provide minimal protection against laser burns but she doubted that. She shuddered at the thought of wearing it again. She even hated touching it. But if it might help, then she had to take it along. If nothing else, it may prove useful to have extra cloth on hand for sleeping material or bandages. Chell snagged an old, ratty backpack from the top of the closet and stuffed the jumpsuit in on top of the other supplies packed inside. The backpack was heavy—there was a first-aid kit in there, a small blanket, a flashlight of course, and all manner of other things she'd packed just in case a situation like this should ever arise.

With a sigh she stood back up, shouldering the backpack and tucking the long fall boots under her arm. She rummaged in her satchel. Her wallet was there, her gun was there, and extra ammunition was stowed in the backpack. There was nothing else that might be of use in the apartment. It was time to go.

Chell turned and marched out her door, closing and locking it without once looking back.

The halls and corridors were still full of the murky yellow-green smog. Visibility was almost nil; anything could be hiding in that stuff. There could be twenty or more constructs and robots lying in wait, watching him groan sluggishly down his rail.

You should've stayed.

Wheatley's upper optic shutter drooped down as low as it would go and his gaze didn't waver from the floor. There was no sound except for the ever-present, never-ending Hum of the Facility, a noise that a few short hours ago he had never expected to hear again. The cloud of neurotoxin around him thinned out as time passed. It had served its purpose.

So what now?

What could he do now? Dib had been killed just like all those scientists from so long ago. Wheatley was completely alone again, only this time She was online and on the lookout for him. He'd never been so completely and utterly alone since before he had met—

His eye widened. The lady! He could find the lady!

"Ohohoh, that's brilliant!" Wheatley said. "I could find her—tell her everything—apologize, oh, I could apologize! And break her out again, definitely, and we could get out, and then we'd go and fetch Spacey from Dib's house…"

He stopped and shivered as his thoughts once again turned to Dib, the metal plates of his casing rattling. I failed again.
What had he done? Why did he leave? Couldn't he have done… something? No, but maybe running off hadn't really been the right thing to do in that scenario. In the case of his own self-preservation, yes, it had been the best idea, but in the case of—

Once again he cut off the thought, his optic shutters twitching closer together and his handlebars pulling in toward his face. He watched in silence as the yellow-green cloud filling the air vanished completely.

His optic drifted closed. "I'm sorry, mate."

"I see you've abandoned another human."

Wheatley's eye shot open and he jerked backwards on his rail.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You know how you haven't heard from me all this time? I was looking at your records. According to this one, not only are you the Intelligence Dampening Sphere, but you're programmed as the Traitor Sphere as well. I suppose there wasn't enough budget to build two ill-conceived cores, so they combined—no, wait." There was a pause. Wheatley waited, hardly daring to move. Her voice sounded small and tinny and he had located its source as coming from an old intercom on the wall. "I'm sorry, I misread that. You're not the Traitor Core. You're doing the 'traitor' thing all on your own."

"I'm not!" Wheatley blurted, unsure whether She could actually hear him or not. He motored over to the intercom and narrowed his optic shields at it in a glare. "I'm not a traitor! I'm not the one who released neurotoxin into the bloody hallways just now!"

There was no response. You probably had to press a button in order to talk back to Her.

"And another thing, you know what?" Wheatley said, rearing up a little and still shouting at the intercom. "You should stop tryin' to blame other people for things you've done, yeah!"

"Hypocrite," the voice responded flatly. Wheatley quailed and pulled back again. Oh. "I seem to remember you blaming everyone but yourself for your many, many mistakes when you were 'in charge' of this place."

"Did- did I?" Wheatley asked in a small voice, simulating a gulp. "I think you, ah, misunderstood me, see what I actually meant was—"

"As for your comment about neurotoxin, it's true that you didn't purposefully release it into the room, but it was released due to your own stupidity. Need I point that out?"

"Oh, ho ho," Wheatley laughed bitterly. "Are we really gonna do that? Yeah, sure, that great bloody neurotoxin cloud was let loose in the halls because I messed with the generator a flipping year ago. You and I both know that the generator would've been absolutely fine if you hadn't... hadn'mn't what am I DOING?" He lurched backwards, his optic contracting with a sharp prick of pain as the broken edges of it scraped against each other.

"I would be wary of speaking my mind if I were you," the voice said. "I'll be listening."

The intercom shut off with a beep. Wheatley didn't hesitate a second before rushing off down the rail, servos whirring and connector screeching in protest. If She had been able to hear him through the intercom, She must know exactly where he was and that meant he had to get away as fast as his motor would carry him. He careened down the rail, searching desperately for a hiding place he could be sure was out of Her reach.
"Double cheeseburger," Chell said to the dull-eyed teenager behind the counter. She had to force the words out as her stomach heaved at the very idea of eating right now.

"You want the combo or just the burger?" the boy asked, rubbing his pimply nose with one finger.

Chell ordered the combo, paid an absurd amount of money for a meal that was sure to be mostly grease, and was told to wait while her food was prepared. She cast a glance back to the table where she'd stowed her backpack and boots. They remained undisturbed. She licked her lips and swallowed, taking in a shaky breath. Ever since she'd stepped out of her apartment the world had seemed out of focus and distant, like nothing around her was real. But that made sense, didn't it? She was going back there. She'd only ever revisited the place in nightmares. And somehow, the dreams she was plagued with by night had always been more vivid and real than her waking life.

Maybe she'd never escaped at all. Maybe, instead of venturing into a waking nightmare, she was simply waking up after a long stay in the Relaxation Center.

Chell pinched herself in the upper arm, hard.

"Ma'am?" someone said, startling her into looking up. The boy at the counter was holding up a dirty paper bag that looked, as she had expected, like it had been dipped in grease. In the other hand he had an empty cup. "Your food's ready." He nodded at the arm she'd just pinched. "You gonna be all right?"

"I'm fine." Chell took the bag and the cup, which she filled to the brim with salty lemonade from the soda fountain beside the counter. Then she sat at her table facing away from the front of the store so she wouldn't have to look at that boy anymore.

Inside the bag was a burger wrapped haphazardly in flimsy paper marked with the MacMeatie's logo, along with a carton of cold French fries. Chell gulped everything down without really tasting it, which was probably for the best. When she was done she sat still for a long moment, clenching the edge of the table in an iron grip. Her eyesight had gone blurry. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes, taking a shaky breath before gathering up her trash, draining the rest of her lemonade in a few gulps, and dumping everything in the nearest trashcan. She picked up her backpack and boots again and left the building with quick, purposeful strides.

The air outside the MacMeatie's building, while not exactly fresh, definitely smelled better than inside. Chell rolled her shoulders in an attempt to ease up her tense muscles and walked to the bus stop a few yards down the street, sitting down on the bench and running her finger over the route map standing next to her. Two bus transfers would take her as close to the rundown, unobtrusive little shack as she could get via the road. She'd have to walk the rest of the way.

According to the schedule, the next bus wasn't coming for twenty minutes. Chell clenched and unclenched her fists, forcing herself to stay seated and wait. She itched to hop up and just walk to the shack, but she knew that was a bad idea. There was such a thing as conserving energy and as far as she could figure, that was about the best thing she could do right now. She would be of no help to anyone if she arrived at the Facility too exhausted to move. Besides, she hadn't even walked to this town when she'd first been released. She had spent most of the trip hitchhiking. Walking would be a whole different story.

The minutes crawled by. Chell closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing and struggling to get her heart to beat at a more normal rate. Right now it was racing.

"Need a lift?"
Chell's eyes snapped open at the familiar voice. Hovering in front of her was a large red object with a capsule in the front and long claw-like features protruding from the back. It was a little vehicle—a tiny, red, other-worldly vehicle. The capsule opened to reveal Gaz, her hands on the controls. Chell stood up, clutching her pack and boots to her chest and staring. "What is that?"

"Dib's stupid alien ship," Gaz replied, her voice almost emotionless. "I know it looks like it'll collapse any second, but it actually does fly. I fixed it up myself. Come on, it'll get you wherever you're going much faster than a bus." The girl took the ship down until it landed on the road.

Chell cast Gaz a glance. A kid her age probably wasn't the best person to fix any kind of spacecraft, let alone an alien one. The girl opened the glass dome of the ship, looking at Chell again. "So, do you want to come help get Dib out of whatever stupid mess he's gotten himself into this time? Or not."

Chell looked the ship over again—it looked big enough for two kids to fit, but an adult her size might have trouble. Her mouth tightened into a dark line and her eyes hardened. She clambered into the ship next to Gaz and squeezed herself into the tiny space. The capsule closed back over her head and she gave an involuntary shudder, unbidden images of the pod beds in the Relaxation Chambers rising to the forefront of her mind.

Gaz didn't move from her spot. "I'll drive. You'd probably run us straight into the ground."

Fine. Chell leaned back into the uncomfortable seat, unable to shake the tension from her arms. She stiffened as the ship lifted from the ground and hovered for a second before Gaz took it forward, higher and higher above the road until the bench Chell had been sitting on moments before was a tiny blue dot far below. Chell gripped the edge of her seat and swallowed hard.

"Where are we going? Do you have coordinates?" Gaz asked. Chell nodded, her face pale and her teeth gnashing together. She reached over to the screen Gaz presented to her and punched in the coordinates she had learned by heart nearly a year ago. With every number her head throbbed as the gravity of the situation fully took hold. She was going back. She was going, willingly, back to that place. She'd likely come face-to-face with the two AIs that she despised more than anyone or anything else that she had ever come across. …Well, one of them, anyway…

She sighed, her eyes sliding closed and her head dropping down. Somehow, despite the sick feeling the thought of returning gave her, the knowledge wasn't much of a shock. With a start, she realized it was because she wasn't surprised in the least. She had already known. She'd known ever since she'd stood outside of that room and heard that core’s voice through the door—no. She'd known ever since she'd stood outside of that room and heard that core’s voice through the door—no. She'd known well before that. She'd known since the elevator had opened and she'd stepped out of a tiny shack in the middle of a sunny wheat field.


Chell slitted open her eyes and stared directly forward. They were flying over a city, though whether it was the city she'd been living in for a year or a different one she didn't know. Her eyes flitted to the screen—yes, they were going the right way. Gaz kept her face stoic as she flew and was completely silent. Chell let out a breath, feeling the muscles in her arms relax one by one. This ride would be her last reprieve before venturing into the depths of the Facility. She shifted her gaze to Gaz again.

She had assumed the girl had decided to abandon her brother. And while that thought had been shocking, it had been something of a relief. The fewer kids near that place, the better. She wished the girl was not coming along. The thought ate at her heart like a parasite. Aperture was no place for children, that was for sure.
It was like a nightmare.

One of those horrid visions that sometimes plagued him when stress elevated his paranoia to staggering amounts or when he was rendered unconscious by a failed experiment.

Zim sat curled in a corner, hunched over with his face and body bathed in sweat. His uniform clung to his skin and his hands were cold and clammy. He rubbed them together to massage some of the feeling back into them. The room in which he was imprisoned was small, only a few paces from end to end, but he tried not to think about that. He also tried not to think about the fact that he was trapped without a disguise in a strange, sinister-looking place that he had been dragged to by a robot. There was no way out of this room—he'd checked. There wasn't even a door. He'd only gotten in here via a panel that pulled out of the way to make enough room for the brutish robot to shove him in. It was hot and stuffy in the tiny place and there was barely any air to breathe.

And there was the fact that that giant hanging thing had figured out his identity. It had to be some sort of trick. Probably Dib was the mastermind behind all of this, stupid human.

This was just another ruse to get Zim to fail his mission. But it wasn't—it wasn't working.

There was a soft beep.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a female voice, belonging to the robotic behemoth he had encountered earlier, said, only she didn't sound sorry at all. "There were a few things in the facility that demanded my attention for a short while. Actually, there is still one loose end that needs to be taken care of, but don't worry about that. It'll be dealt with soon enough, and then we can begin the testing. Starting with an examination.

"Also, I must apologize for your current, well, we'll call them living conditions. Right now it's the safest place to keep you because I don't know what all you're capable of. Oh, but I will." Her voice took on a sinister undertone. "Believe me, I will. Think of how much Science could advance by simply studying your extraterrestrial biology. It's an exciting prospect, don't you agree?"

Zim swiped his tongue over his dry lips in an effort to regain the power of speech, but all that came out was a slight cough. Inwardly he berated himself. What was his problem? He wasn't scared of a computer. He feared NOTHING. Bracing one hand against the wall, he rose to his feet. His antennae lifted slightly and brushed the ceiling of the tiny space, sending shivers through his scalp. He gave a loud cough for no other purpose than to find his voice again. "Release me!" he finally managed to shout.

"I'll be back soon," the computer said. "I have to go—" She broke off and her voice became just a little bit fainter. "Orange, what are you doing here? You haven't completed your task yet. What are you—" Her voice returned to its normal level. "Don't go anywhere." With that, there was another beep, indicating that the intercom—or whatever she was talking to him from—had shut off. There was a definite shift in the little room as if a malignant presence had faded away. Zim collapsed with his back against the wall, the metal of his PAK clinking on the plaster surface. He started to sink back down into a sitting position but with a strenuous effort pulled himself up again. No, he was not going to just sit around listlessly. He was going to… do something.

His radio sprang from his PAK on a metal arm. It hit the low ceiling with a loud clang that rattled Zim's eardrums and he winced, pulling the radio around so he could speak into it. "GIR!"

The radio crackled but there was otherwise no response.

Zim smacked it with the heel of his hand a few times. "GIR? Come in! GIR! Hello?" Beads of sweat
rolled down his forehead and he wiped them away. "I know you're there, GIR! The radio's inside your head! So unless you've managed to dislodge your head again—"

"Hiiii!" the shrill voice of the robot finally came through the radio.

"GIR! Good!" Zim straightened up. "I need your help. I've been abducted—"

"You gettin' Suck Munkeys?" GIR asked.

Zim shook his head. "No! I've been abducted by a robot working for a deranged science facility! MiniMoose is out of commission and I'm trapped in a tiny room. You have to get me out of here immediately! Do you understand, GIR?"

"Uh huh," GIR said, but he sounded distracted by something. He was always distracted by something.

"Come to these coordinates right away!" Zim said.

"Okey-dokey!" GIR cheered. The line crackled again and Zim caught a bit of dialogue blaring from the television in his base before the radio shut off.

GIR would come through. GIR always came through. Usually. Most times. In the meantime, Zim would come up with a plan—a brilliant plan, a plan worthy of the Irken Empire, worthy of ZIM—

Zim stood still in the dark, tiny room, wringing his hands.

"He's dead. You know that, right?"

Orange clutched the small figure to her oblong core so that he was pressed up against her, right beneath her optic. Her knees shook. The suspended chassis towered in front of her with the yellow optic bearing down on her small form. She let out a low chitter of protest.

"There's nothing you can do for him. And honestly, I'm not sure why you'd want to help him. What have humans ever done for you?"

Orange squeaked and shook her face vigorously, jostling the limp bundle in her arms. He was still warm and she could feel the slight trembling of the little human's breath, though it seemed weak and uneven to her. The human was alive, but only just, and she knew it wouldn't be long before he stopped functioning entirely.

"You can't help him. He's not worth expending the resources on."

The narrowed, yellow optic turned away. Orange shook, hugging the small human to herself. True, she hadn't managed to catch her real target—the blue-eyed core—but she couldn't just leave this human lying there. Maybe if Blue had been with her at the time he would have convinced her otherwise. Maybe humans were best left for dead. But Blue wasn't here—she didn't know where he was, and she missed him almost more than her circuits could bear—and she knew that unless the master of the Facility ordered her to dispose of the human she had to do whatever she could to keep him alive.

The sounds of his breathing were growing shallower.

"He's probably not even good for testing." She said.

Orange cringed and waited for the order to come. All she could tell herself was that she'd done
everything she could.
The constant sounds of moving machinery and creaking metal were much less abrasive back here. If you didn't think about it—if you really didn't think about it—you could almost imagine you were in some other dimly-lit hall of offices, in some other place. A nice, normal, safe place, far from here.

Wheatley poked around a doorframe, flicking on his flashlight and giving the room a quick once-over. There was no one in there. A little bit of the pent-up tension he'd been feeling left his frame and he simulated a small sigh of relief. He couldn't help but shake the feeling that if any robot found him, if any other core found him, they'd drag him straight back to Her.

This was one of the few offices that actually had a management rail. He hurried inside, his connector squeaking. The space was larger than a regular Aperture office. The bright light given off by his optic bounced across a long table with a few chairs around it, and the walls were covered in cupboards, bookshelves, and filing cabinets.

Most of those things were of absolutely no use or interest to Wheatley, though they did indicate that he was in the right place. One quick check of his internal map (he looked at it only briefly, worried that She might be able to sense him accessing it somehow) told him that his assumption was correct. There was a computer sitting on top of the table. Wheatley pulled as close to it as the management rail would allow and lowered himself on his connector, blinking down at the blank monitor.

This was it. The complete database of Aperture Laboratories' human test subjects was stored on this computer—or at least, it used to be.

He simulated a throat-clearing sound and spoke up, his voice level quieter than usual. "Right, this'll only take a second. Quick second. Computer's here, monitor's here, filing cabinets here. Still no pens, though. Well, there might be some in the filing cabinets, but I don't need any." He broke off. Rambling like that was pointless. There was no one around that he needed to try to impress. Best to just get on with it. "Okay, interfacing… now." He opened a connection with the computer's mainframe, straightening up and raising his voice a smidgen. "Hello. Hello? Anyone in there? I need a little help with something, if you don't mind! It is fairly urgent. Lives hang in the balance, and all."

There was no intelligible reply, though a light on the monitor blinked blue and it flickered on to reveal a login screen. Wheatley could feel a sort of presence come awake on the edge of his processor and knew that he had the computer AI's attention. Luckily it was sentient just like pretty much every other piece of machinery in this place. "Ah! Good, there you are. Have you got a minute?" He waited a few seconds for a reply. When none came, he forged ahead anyway. "Here is, here's the thing. I know you've got the list of test subjects in this place. I need you to pull that up for me. A list of any test subjects that were active recently—say, in the last year or so—and that are currently, um, alive. I also need you to not let Her know about this. You got it?" He paused again. Still no response. "…If I'm coming off as rude, it is not on purpose, believe me. I just really, really need that list of test subjects. And other helpful information, like perhaps… their current locations, if available. That would be nice. Could you do that? Do me a favor? AI to AI?"

[Who… are you?] the computer's mainframe finally said.

Wheatley shook his optic. "Not important! Why would that be important? That information is on a need-to-know basis. And frankly, you don't need to know. All you do need to know is that I am in a major hurry, and I'm… not too keen on staying in one place for too long, if I'm honest, so if you could just, y'know. Give me the list. Please."
The AI hesitated.

"All right look, all I want is the list. I need some sort of reference to go by—I'm looking for someone, see, and my map is being bloody useless. Don't want anything else, just the list and the locations, if you've got 'em."

[...This is against regulations—]

"Right. But it's okay! Because no one else is here to know you're doing it!" Wheatley pulled up his lower optic shutter in what he hoped was a confident smile. "...Except, well, except for Her, but She won't be able to see what you're doing, will She?"

[No,] the computer said.

Wheatley nodded. "Good. So, nothing to worry about. Even better: you don't tell Her that I was here, and I won't tell Her that you helped me. Fair deal?"

[If you keep that promise.] The computer finally gave in. Wheatley's optic brightened and he leaned closer to the monitor on the desk. [What is your designated login information?]

"Umm..." Wheatley thought back. It had been just the day before, but it felt like years ago—he remembered Dib plugging him into the computer and creating an account of his own even though he didn't work here. Guilt clouded his processor, thinking about the boy again, but he forced himself to push the thought to the side. "Okay, as I recall, username is... Dib1. Password is SwollenEyeball1231, with a capital S and capital E in eyeball. No idea what that means, but there you go."

The computer entered the information into the login fields and the screen faded to be replaced by a jittery amber desktop bearing the circular Aperture logo. Immediately afterward, the database popped open, and the monitor was overtaken by a list of names and numbers.

Wheatley's eye widened. "Oh! Is that it? Is that the list? There are... a lot of names there. And- and this was all sort of a fluke, actually, there's only one test subject in this entire bloody place. I should know, I... I mean... never mind, not important. Has this not been updated in, what, years? Or...? And it just occurred to me that I don't... actually know her name. Okay, though, that's okay. She'll be last on the list, I'm betting. So... if you could just scroll down to the bottom, please..."

The computer acknowledged his request with a flicker of the screen and the list scrolled down until it stopped at the very bottom. Wheatley narrowed his optic, peering at the last few names. None of them jumped out at him as sounding like they belonged to the lady. She didn't seem like a "James" or a "Marc," or even a "Brenda." "Emily"? No, that didn't seem right either.

"Rrggh, this is gonna be harder than I thought," Wheatley said, backing up a little. "Is there any way to make this any easier? You wouldn't happen to know her name, would you?"

[I don't know which test subject you are referring to. I haven't been conscious like this since a man came in and changed the test subject order.]

"A man? Must've been bloody ages ago." He shook his inner casing, averting his gaze from the wavering light of the computer screen. "I s'pose this really was a long shot, anyway."

[I'm sorry.]

"Yeah." Wheatley turned and trundled away, heading back toward the door. "Where to now? I've got absolutely no idea where she is. I should've known the computer would be no help at all.
Right… if I were an omnipotent master of the Facility who actually knew what he was doing, where would I stow a human who was brilliant at solving tests and had offed two aforementioned omnipotent AIs with nothing but a portal gun? First guess would be Extended Relaxation. I could check over there, take a look around the place. But what if- what if she's actually being tested? I—hold on!" He wheeled around again and hurried back to the computer. "Me again! Sorry. Is there anyone being tested right now?"

The computer hummed and whirred, its internal fans kicking in as the server processed his question. After a moment, the noise wound down, and it responded. [No tests in progress at this time.]

"Extended Relaxation is the first place I should look, then," Wheatley decided. "Can you see if any of those rooms are in use?"

[No, I can't.]

"Right." Wheatley drooped again. "Thanks anyway. I'm cutting off the connection now, so… bye." The screen flickered again, and he severed contact.

It was awfully quiet in here, now.

Wheatley turned and once again headed through the door, not turning back this time. He made another quick check of his internal map, located the Relaxation Center, and started in that direction.

He just had to find her. If he could find her, then everything would work out all right. Okay, not everything, obviously. But finding her would definitely be a step in a better direction, so to speak. He just had to find her. Find her. Find the lady. Find her before either of them were stuck down here any longer. Before She did anything more to them.

…Speaking of Her, She hadn't spoken up for a long while. According to the computer, there weren't even any active tests holding Her attention at the moment. What was She doing?

"Something too horrible to think about, probably," he answered himself. Best to just not think about Her at all, actually. He needed to just get to the Relaxation Center and do a quick run-through of all the boxes that could potentially hold a human without killing them. Maybe even the ones that weren't likely able to hold a human without killing them. Who knew what She might have in mind for the lady, after all.

The way to the Relaxation Center was blocked.

Wheatley had spent no less than twenty minutes hanging in the shadows around a corner, watching the hall ahead with his optic constricted in panic. A few feet down the management rail a nanobot work crew toiled away, fixing up a small section of the rail that had fallen into disrepair. He didn't dare move and kept as still as possible. Nanobots had a direct link back to Her, didn't they? How else would She be able to order so many of them about as She pleased?

He inched backwards away from the cloud of infinitesimally small robots, hoping against hope that he wouldn't make a sound. There had to be another way through. Some other way that he… had never noticed before, even though he used to work in this area. Right.

In fact, he was positive there was another way. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but he was sure that if he looked hard enough, he'd find a convenient rail that branched off and would take him straight to the Relaxation Center, bypassing the nanobots entirely. That would be ideal. And this place was huge, anyway—how could there be only one rail leading to the place that was supposed to house all of the dormant test subjects?
He backed away a bit more, then swiveled around to go back the way he had come—only to find himself looking straight into another optic.

"AAH!" He gave a reflexive yell, jerking back, his optic a tiny point of light.

The reddish optic of the strange core in front of him flickered as small as his own. "Who- who are y-you? I've n-never seen you around. N-n-no one else ever uses this rail, j-just a few of us do. N-no one else, in- in months!"

"Er…!" Wheatley tried to force himself to calm down, though his panic was sending his already scatterbrained thoughts into overdrive. He glanced around the other core. "Sorry! Didn't- didn't expect anyone else to be here, haha! I was… just—I was… sight-seeing! Sight-seeing. Around the Extended Relaxation Center—lovely vacation destination. Nothing wrong with sight-seeing, nothing wrong with having a bit of a look about now and again, see what's what and what's going on. And… I… got lost. Turned right when I should've gone a hard left, sort of thing." The words tumbled haphazardly from his vocal processor as he looked the core over. He didn't recognize him. Had no idea what his programming might be. Also, now that Wheatley thought about it, the other core seemed even more shaken up by the sudden encounter than he was, and was visibly shivering. Wheatley felt his optic expand a little and his handles inched closer to their relaxed state rather than clinging around his face. "…You, er, you all right, mate?" He moved forward just a tad and the other core flinched away from him.

"No! I mean yes! But no one goes sight-seeing here!" the core said, still with that terrified look. "And- and- and I-I have to get through."

Wheatley swung his optic around to check behind him. He could still see the faint shimmer of the nanobots up ahead. They sure were taking their good old time fixing that little section of rail. He turned his optic the right way again and gave the other core a doubtful look. "Er, you could try, but you won't get very far. There's some nanobots workin' on the rail up there."

"The rail's broken?! I have to tell Gloria!" the core shrieked, spun around, and dashed off without a backwards glance.

"Oh. Wonderful. Well, good job alerting the entire facility that I'm over here," Wheatley said, following the rail after the other core and narrowing his eye shields. "Dunno what his problem was. Might as well just park myself here now with a giant neon sign going 'Wheatley! Ta-da! Here he is, free of charge, ready to be taken back to Her for whatever horrific punishment She's got in store! Offer expires soon so take it while it—' aaand I'm rambling again, aren't I. Yeah… Fat lot of good that'll do me. I'm supposed to be sneaking, not blabbering until my vocal processor wears itself thin. Silence, that's good, let's have some silence. Probably would help me a lot more than—" He broke off with another yelp. In front of him the rail branched off, and on the right fork hung the core he had just encountered along with yet another one that he didn't recognize.

"So who are you supposed to be?" the new core asked. This one had a feminine voice. She sounded calmer than the other one, though not any more upbeat, and her upper optic shutter drooped down over her orange eye in a weary expression.

"I'm just passing through!" Wheatley said quickly. "I was- I was just telling your friend, there. Right?" He nodded at the red-eyed core, which backed away from him. "Yeah. Seriously, no need to worry about little old me."

The female core sighed, closing her optic. "The boss-lady sent you down here to spy on us, didn't she? Go ahead, there's nothing to see."
"What?" Wheatley jumped back a little. "No! No, nononono. No, this has got nothing to do with Her. I'm here on my own."

"What do you w-want with us?" the other core, still sounding terrified out of his mind, whimpered. "I'm not corrupt! I'm not! G-Gloria, tell him!"

"You're going to report us, aren't you?" the female core—Gloria, perhaps?—asked, her optic contracting in the first emotive response that Wheatley had seen from her so far.

"No, I'm not reporting anyone…" Wheatley said, shaking his inner casing. "What would I even be reporting you for?!"

"I don't know! We must've done something!" The annoying red-eyed core had his handles huddled into his face, his optic still so small that Wheatley couldn't see the design of it.

"Look, I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I really need to be going now," he said. He slid past them, sneaking a look behind him as he went and catching the two of them staring after him. Bloody weirdos.

"You'll never make it wherever you're going!" Gloria called. "If you're not supposed to be here, the boss-lady'll catch you and throw you in the Corrupted Cores Bin! We're all going in the bin."

"Y-you're not even going the right way!" the other core said.

Wheatley chanced another glance backwards. "Yeah? And how would you know where—"

"Y-you can't get to the Relaxation Center that way!"

He stopped. So he'd been right, earlier, apparently. He'd been afraid of that. "Is there any other way to get there, then?" he asked, edging back to them. "Preferably not directly through a field of nanobots?"

The two other cores looked at each other, then Gloria glanced back up at Wheatley. "I think Nick knows a way," she said with a twitch of her handles.

Wheatley winced a little, his gaze sliding to the fearful core. "Is he Nick?"

"Nick is terrifying!" the core whispered.

"I'll go get him." With a sigh, Gloria turned around and headed back down the fork in the rail. "Science help us all."

The red-eyed core continued to stare at Wheatley, never losing his petrified look. Even Wheatley, who had to admit to himself that he scared more easily than was probably good for him, found this to be getting a little old.

"Is this how you react to any new core that comes down here?" he asked. The other core hesitated for a brief moment, then bobbed his inner casing up and down. Wheatley sighed and turned away from him. Instead, he examined the walls of the hallway. Uneasiness crept through his processor. The walls were off-white but obviously portalable. They were also made up of panels, not plaster. She doesn't know I'm here, he thought, shrinking away from the walls that to him suddenly looked a lot more treacherous. She won't attack. She doesn't know I'm here.

"I found Nick," Gloria's voice drawled. The red-eyed core jumped at the sound. Gloria reappeared with another core following behind her—this was starting to seem like too many cores on one rail.
"HI!" 'Nick' burst out upon seeing Wheatley, sending the red-eyed core screaming and darting past Wheatley down the rail a few feet. "Someone new! I never get to meet anyone new!"

"Shut up," Gloria told him.

"Look, I'm really not that new." Wheatley frowned. "I'm not new at all, actually, especially in this area of the Facility. I've just never seen any of you before. In fact, I'd say I'm probably ages older than you lot. So, definitely not new."

"You must've had a lot of birthdays!" Nick responded. "Did you want to know another way to get to the Relaxation Center? I can show it to you! That place is great!"

Wheatley looked from him to the terrified core, who was still lingering on the rail with his entire body wracked with uncontrollable shivers. "Er, right. Question: do either of you ever calm down?"

"They're not going to calm down until they're dead," Gloria said flatly.

"And I'm- I'm stuck with you, aren't I." Wheatley looked at Nick, who grinned back. "Okay. So, can you show me the other way to the Relaxation Center? That would be much appreciated."

"Yeah! Yeah! 'Scuse me." The three strange cores on the rail performed a quick maneuver of sliding onto the rail's forks and then shifting back, so that Wheatley was left with Nick sitting on the rail in front of him. Now that Wheatley was close enough he could see the design in the other core's optic. It was comprised of eight triangles in a ring from the center, alternating between white and dark green. "C'mon! It's this way!" He started heading off down the fork in the rail that the other cores had been hanging from. Wheatley followed at a distance.

Nick was keen on pointing out every little thing they passed. Every door they went by led to a room, and every room had a story that the other core was only too happy to recount. Wheatley tried to smile and look like he was paying the utmost attention but by the fourth or so office story he had to fight the urge to roll his optic. At least his stories were interesting.

"Hey! That's different."

Wheatley snapped out of his thoughts and focused on where Nick was looking. The other core was facing a wall directly in front of them. There was a circular door in it, which was closed, but that hardly mattered; the rails always continued on through the walls so cores could travel without being hindered by the doors.

"What's the holdup?" he asked.

"Well, the rail used to go right through, but I think something's been moved." Nick turned back to face him, still smiling. "I guess we can go back! That was fun, wasn't it?"

Wheatley craned to look around the overly-excited core and his optic widened. Instead of spanning through a cutout in the wall, the rail just... stopped right up against it. There was no way through. "What? No, no, no, that can't be right!" he said. "You said we could get through this way!"

"Yep! Guess it moved." Nick was still grinning.

Narrowing his eye shields, Wheatley glowered at him. "Great, so, what now? I have to either go back and try to get through a cloud of nanobots who probably still haven't forgiven me for accidentally smashing the nanobot breakroom a while back, or somehow break through a wall that may or may not have a management rail ready and waiting on the other side?"
"Fun choices!" The other core wiggled his handles.

Wheatley sighed and did an about-face. "Okay. I'm going back."

They had taken several turns down various short hallways getting this far and Wheatley would have gotten lost if not for Nick happily guiding him back to where they'd come from—he was still wary of checking his map. When they finally arrived back he breezed right past Gloria and the other core, both of whom were still waiting around at the rail crossroads because apparently they didn't have anything better to do than watch him run around like a bloody lunatic. He'd have to just dart through the nanobots and hope for the best.

Hoping for the best had done pretty well for him so far, hadn't it? Well… except for that part where he had told the lady to put him in the chassis. Everything had pretty much gone downhill from there. He shook his optic. Don't think about that.

Up ahead he could see the nanobots again. He leaned forward, making straight toward them. However, just as he reached the spot, there was a great rumbling in the ceiling. Panels came loose and swung down, dislodging the management rail from the ceiling with a terrible screech of metal and a shower of sparks. Wheatley put on the brakes with a shriek and spurred the connector into reverse, leaping backwards.

"What the—what was that?" he spluttered, stopping a good distance away and staring at the area in horror. The nanobots that had been working on the rail had scattered but they came back now, swarming around the spot and chirping in fear, confusion, and anger.

A horrible feeling tugged at Wheatley's processor. Had that just been an accident?

Wheeling around, he raced back down the rail in the direction he had come, only to find it and the branch off the rail blocked by the three cores he'd left behind.

"What's going on? Didn't find what you were looking for, huh?" Gloria peered past him.

"What was that sound?" the red-eyed core asked.

"I have to get out of here," Wheatley said. "Is there a quick exit away from this place? Some sort of shortcut? Or something?"

"Congratulations, cores. You've caught the fugitive."

All the cores, Wheatley included, jumped at the sound of the voice, tinny and processed as it was.

"You told Her I was here?" Wheatley gasped.

"Probably not," Gloria said.

"No!" the fearful core shrieked. "Where's her camera?! I didn't know she had a camera back here! The red eye stares into your soul…"

"Tell me, did any of you know you've been talking to the I.D. Core all this time?"

The cores all backed away from Wheatley, who shrank into his casing.

Gloria's eye was wide. "I.D.?"

"Um, Wheatley, actually," he said. "Call me Wheatley. Otherwise it doesn't even make sense. I mean, pssh, whaat, 'Identification Core'? What does that even mean? What purpose would—"
"That's not what I.D. means, *Intelligence Dampening Core*," Gloria said with a narrowed optic. "Weren't you the one who took over the boss-lady's body that one time and totally wrecked the place?"

"HE'S A FREAKING MANIAC!" the fearful core screamed, taking off down the rail again.

"Charles, wait—! Oh, forget it." Gloria rolled her optic.

"It's funny, really. This core and his idiotic actions while temporarily in charge of this facility is the reason none of you have jobs any longer," the voice said pleasantly. "And now he's fallen right into your midst. You should thank him for everything he's done to destroy your potential careers."

"Oh, really." Gloria glared at him. "Is that true? Should've known."

"Right, okay, I'm sorry." Wheatley hunched down in his casing, his optic a tiny pinprick of light. "Dunno what I did, but I'm sorry! Could you- could you let me through? Please? Then you'll never see me again. Being honest here."

"Sure!" Nick said, beaming.

"Shut up," Gloria told him.

"Wait right there. I've got a surprise for you."

Wheatley's optic shrunk further and darted around, trying to locate where *She* was speaking from. "Let- let me guess. Will I, um, love it to death?"

"Allow me to put this into words you might have a chance of comprehending: no. Not quite."

He rushed forward, looking frantically from Nick to Gloria. "You've gotta let me through! Come on! She's gonna *kill* me—She's gonna do something *worse* than killing me—!"

"You probably deserve it," Gloria said.

"Aw, that's not very nice!" Nick protested.

"Shut up."

Wheatley backed away from them, servos whirring in a panic. They were blocking the way forward and he couldn't go back—the rail was broken! He swung his optic around to look behind him on the off chance that the nanobots had repaired the rail and it was usable again, but they had vanished. *She* must have called them away. "Okay. Okay, you know what?" he said, turning his optic the right way again. "I'm laying all my cards on the table, here. She's sending her little robots after me again, I'll bet, and if they catch me I'll never get away again. You know what happened last time She caught me? She threw me in the Corrupted Cores Bin! Yeah, the very place you told me you *do not* want to end up. That's what She does with cores. And guess what the little robots She's sending have! Two arms, each! So that makes four arms, each one perfectly good for carrying around a core, and guess how many there are of us? Four! One for each arm!"

"You honestly think they'd capture *all* of us?" Gloria blinked a few times, her optic shrinking.

Wheatley nodded. "Yes, yes, no doubt about it, no doubts whatsoever, I don't think She'd pass up the chance of capturin' a few cores and throwing them in the Corrupted Cores Bin, from which there is very little chance of escaping unless you've got a human with a grappling hook on your side. Therefore, I really think we should *get out of here*. Now. That is, right now."
As soon as he spoke, a flash of purple hit the wall nearby and a shimmering oval blossomed into existence on the white surface. Through the portal peered the two robots that Wheatley had been dreading would show up. The taller one—its optic a bright orange and its body ovoid like a turret—caught sight of him and made a chirping noise, pointing a metal finger in his direction. The shorter one, its optic bright blue and its body about the size and shape of Wheatley's, gargled something and hopped through the portal.

"Time to go!" Gloria said. She and Nick turned and darted off the branch in the rail that Wheatley had been traveling down just a few minutes ago. The two robots ignored them completely, pelting down the hallway with long strides and their gazes fixed on Wheatley alone.

For Wheatley's part, he did the only thing he could do. He sat frozen for a second, staring at the robots in terror. Then his self-preservation instinct kicked in, overtaking his panic; he screamed, turned, and took off down the rail as fast as his connector would carry him. Behind him he could hear the robots squabble with each other for a moment before giving chase.

Around him, panels came loose from the ceiling and jarred the management rail out of position. Wheatley willed his connector to maintain its grip on the rail, even as small portions of it buckled and became dislodged from the ceiling.

"You don't want to do this, mate, honestly!" he called down to the pursuing constructs, terror bringing his voice octaves higher than it was normally. "I—AAH! I just—Gah! You don't- you don't have to—AAH!" The rail was becoming more and more treacherous to navigate. He quit trying to plead with the robots below and put all of his concentration into making it through the hall without being thrown from the management rail, which would mean imminent doom for someone who lacked handy ground-navigating appendages such as legs.

"Did you know that ostriches can run at speeds of up to forty-three miles per hour? It's true," the voice said from a nearby intercom. "Did you also know that I've tested Blue and Orange's running speeds against all existing bipedal animals, including ostriches? The ostriches didn't stand a chance."

"Where did you get bloody ostriches?" Wheatley said, his speech processor hiccuping as he traversed the increasingly jagged rail. She didn't reply and he continued on, his optic narrowed as he struggled to increase his speed. One of the robots arrived underneath him and jumped to snag his bottom handle. He drew it upward just in time and the robot tripped over its own feet, toppling to the floor. I'll never get away from them when the rail's just one long straight path! he thought. He needed to get to a crossroads and, even better, get there before the two robots in order to lose them.

Wheatley swung around a corner and kept going. The panels around him continued attacking the management rail. One came dangerously close to knocking him clean off his connector but he avoided it by a millimeter. He'd never felt so unsafe on a management rail. This was his one means of locomotion, and now he couldn't even rely on it?!

Out of the corner of his eye Wheatley spotted what he'd been looking for—another fork in the rail. He swung to his left and switched to the rail that branched off, darting through a square hole in the wall near the ceiling. The room beyond was in near complete darkness, the only light filtering in from the hall he'd just left. Wheatley didn't turn on his flashlight, rocketing through the room before emerging out in one of the "backstage" areas of the Facility, as he liked to call them. His rail ran right over a catwalk, which was hardly encouraging. He needed to get over a wide space that the robots wouldn't be able to follow to—but no, no, then She could maybe dislodge the rail and send him tumbling into a bottomless pit or something. There had to be some safe place in the Facility, but he'd worry about that later. Right now he just had to worry about escaping.
He'd gotten away.

*Again.*

Her optic constricted and Her hood lowered, focusing a gaze of pure fury on the small object clutched in the claw suspended in front of Her. For a brief moment the claw tightened; one more millimeter and the object in its grip would shatter. However, She restrained Herself, loosening Her grip slightly and shifting the claw so that the little watch hung from it by one of its straps.

The moron's voice crackled from it and grated on Her aural processors. It was both a blessing and a curse that he so often rambled out loud—it could not be simpler to figure out where he was planning to go at each and every turn. However, constantly hearing his voice so close to Her processor gave Her the impulse to crush something.

She turned Her attention away from the watch. Instead, She switched Her vision from Her own optic to the optics of the two robots, Blue and Orange, who were arguing in the hall from which the little idiot had just made a narrow escape.

"*I suppose temporarily reuniting you in order to capture the fugitive core was a poor choice,*" She said.

The two constructs stopped, blinking at each other.

"*I'm not angry—you know, I really don't blame the two of you for being incapable of completing that task. After all, he's a little idiot with the IQ of an Edgeless Safety Cube and less of a function in the facility, and he's stuck on his rail. Both of you only have functioning limbs and portal devices. Clearly, you're at a disadvantage. However will you manage to capture him?*"

Blue made a rumbling sound.

"*Remember earlier when I said you would be allowed to work together again to go after any fugitives? I'm afraid I have to recant that statement. Orange, you continue pursuing the moron. Try not to fail this time. As for you, Blue...*"

The squat, blue-eyed android exploded with little noise and a small shower of shrapnel, and She lost contact with him in a fit of static. Orange shrieked in alarm and scrambled backwards.

"*I'm going to need assistance for my other project.*"

Zim's antennae twitched and he slit open his eyes, blinking. A shaft of light fell across his face. In front of him the silhouette of a blocky figure loomed in his field of vision, a blue, glowing disk right in the middle of it.

The thing made an unintelligible gurgling noise.

"*Whayouwan?*" Zim groaned, closing his eyes again and curling up into a tighter ball than he was already in.

The thing crouched down, crawled into the tiny room in which Zim had been stashed, and warbled again—more urgently this time. Zim glared up at it. The thing reached down and prodded him in the eye.

"*AGH! Hey!*" Zim shouted, jerking backwards and swatting at his eyes. Suddenly he realized that the panels locking him in the room had opened, and he lunged toward them. However, when he
uncurled himself and tried to stand he found that his muscles were stiff and cramped, and he stumbled. The stocky robot caught hold of him and pulled him out of the hole, setting him down on a rickety metal catwalk outside. Zim squinted in the light and balked at the sight of the thing holding him. "It's you!"

It was the same one-eyed robot that had abducted him from his own house.

His remaining PAK legs expanded out and curled behind him with the tips resting on the catwalk, though with only two he wasn't able to use them to rise up and attack—or even threaten.

"You know, you look really pathetic like that," a voice said. Zim drew backwards and looked around in confusion. "Oh, don't mind me. I'm just observing those mechanical appendages of yours. Psychokinetic, I presume. You can manipulate them at will."

The tips of the PAK legs scraped along the metal mesh of the catwalk as Zim drew them closer to himself.

"Anyway, if you were wondering, I've brought you out here to start some testing."

"I'm not taking a filthy test," Zim spat. He addressed the ceiling when he spoke, as he sometimes did for his own base computer.

Oh, his base... What he wouldn't give to be back there right now. This was becoming a major setback and extremely irritating. And who knew what GIR might be doing to his base at that very moment? Hopefully MiniMoose would have enough sense to stop him from—

No, no, wait. MiniMoose had—he had—

"Where's MiniMoose?" Zim demanded of the blue-eyed robot. It resembled the one he had stolen hours ago, except it had limbs and didn't seem able to talk. "Where are his remains? I could still rebuild him."

"Don't worry, I've stored them away," the voice said. "Perhaps you'll get your moose toy back after we've finished here. Of course, he might be a little more... singed than you remember." The voice didn't elaborate on that. "Blue, bring the specimen to a more secure location. The refurbished test Chamber 01 of Track 5, perhaps."

The robot took hold of Zim once more but stood indecisively for a moment, clearly unsure where to go. Finally it headed off in one direction, dragging Zim with it, its heavy footfalls clanging on the metal floor and causing Zim to cringe and flatten his antennae.

Some ways in front of them, a pair of panels slid open. The robot edged its way into the bright interior. It was a somewhat small, empty room, with only a backlit plaque attached to one wall and a white camera with a glowing red lens attached to another. The camera swiveled to focus on Zim as the panels closed up again, and the robot released him.

He scrambled away from the robot to the other side of the room and felt along the wall at the seams between the panels. "How do you open these?!"

"Well, then," the voice said. "Now that you're here, there is Science to be done."

In front of Zim, the panels he'd been trying to wedge his fingers between cracked open and four mechanical arms sprang out. Zim toppled over backwards and spun around, trying to crawl away, but the claws lunged forward and each one took hold of him. They clamped down tightly over his ankles and wrists. He let out a strangled yelp and yanked against the restraints, but they held fast.
The blue-eyed robot stood off to the side, shuffling its "feet."

"Get me out of here!" Zim shouted at it, waving a hand as best he could. The robot gave him a sideways glance but then looked away, unmoving otherwise.

"To simplify things. I thought we'd start off with some questions," the voice said. The light directly in front of Zim brightened significantly and he winced, turning his head away. "I'll ask you again: What is the name of your species?"

"Release me!" he snarled.

"Is every member of your race this unpleasant?"

"I'll call the Armada on you! Don't think I won't! The Tallest will not take kindly to your keeping an Invader prisoner and- and stuff!"

"What do you mean by Tallest?"

"Nnnngg," Zim muttered, gritting his teeth together. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. I'm human."

"Really. Your antennae and insect eyes would suggest differently."

"I have a revolting skin condition!" He heaved at the restraints again. "But I'm normal! Normal!"

The claw holding his right wrist slowly began to turn, forcibly supinating his arm. It continued twisting and Zim hissed in a breath, his back arching and fingers splaying. Just before his wrist gave out, the claw stopped.

"All right. Your species name isn't entirely important to my research at the moment, and there are… other ways of finding it out. First, however, a quick physical examination. Blue, remove the creature's gloves and boots."

"What?" Zim flailed against the claws holding him. "Hey! No! No! Stand away! AWAAAAAY!"

The robot came forward and took Zim's left foot in its hands, the mechanical claw on Zim's ankle loosening so the robot could pull the boot off without difficulty. As soon as Zim's toes met the air they curled inward and he struggled to plant his weight on his right leg and keep his bare foot off the floor. The claw holding his left leg pulled upwards and he grunted, hopping on one foot to keep his balance.

"Two toes," the voice observed. "And dull, non-retractable claws. How intriguing."

The robot then took Zim's left-hand glove and slid it off. Zim howled, curling his hand and pulling it to his chest, and snapped up his head to glare at the robot. "Give me back my glove!"

The mechanical claw, surprisingly gentle, pulled his hand forward.

Zim's fingers were thinner and tapered more than a human's. His palms were much narrower as well and the underside of his hand was a paler shade of green than the rest of him.

The mechanical claw shifted forward on his hand and squeezed one of his fingertips. A small black claw was forcefully unsheathed. "So your hands have retractable claws. I wonder if they're made of the same material as human fingernails?"

"Of course not!" Zim snapped. "Filthy human fingernails. Probably made of plastic or something."
"Is that so?" the voice said. "Well, then, I'll need a good DNA sample."

Zim stiffened, struggling to retract the claw.

"I could render you unconscious for this procedure, but it will go much more quickly otherwise. Hold still."

"What?" Zim said. "No—"

The mechanical arm moved again. It took hold of Zim's claw before he could retract it, and it pulled with a tremendous amount of force.

The world went dark for a moment.

A loud howling sound rattled Zim's hearing organs. When his vision came back, the room swam, and it took him several seconds to realize that the sounds he was hearing were his own screams. He stopped screaming. His entire hand throbbed—he yanked it closer to himself, which the mechanical claw allowed him to do, but it just caused more pain. One finger looked strangely bare. Goopy, translucent pink blood bubbled at the tip. An involuntary whimper escaped the back of his throat and he licked at the tip of the injured finger.

The computer voice said something else but Zim didn't hear it. His PAK performed an automatic diagnosis of his body shell, reporting that one claw was unaccounted for. The blood leaking from his finger clotted up and the wound closed over. Keratin proteins began slowly layering up at the end of the finger. The claw would be fully grown back in less than an hour, but it hurt like a slorrbeast bite.

Just as Zim let out a shaky breath and lowered his hand there was a hot, intense pain at the top of his head that made him yowl. His legs buckled and he dropped down and hung limp, stars exploding in front of his eyes. A wave of nausea erupted from the pit of his squeedily-spool. The overpowering agony in his head ended quickly, but the spot throbbed and ached. Zim swallowed hard and panted. He reached up and rubbed at his scalp. His hand came away wet. When he pulled it down to look at it he saw that the green skin was streaked pink.

The robot in front of him was wrapping something up in a white cloth, now stained pink. Zim groaned, clenching his fist and making a weak attempt to pull himself together.

*They ripped my antenna out,* he thought, giving a dazed and delusional laugh. *Mm-hm... my antenna, pulled it right out.* He blinked and shook his head. "He-hey! Hey!"

He must have been dead to the world for a moment. The robot was gone.

"I'm going to need more samples later," the voice said. "But these should do for now. Tell me, are you ready to answer my questions?"

Zim blinked again and narrowed his eyes to slits, shaking a little. *Focus. Focus.* "These will grow back, you know."

"Do you expect me to be upset by that? I'm not interested in leaving you in a crippled state. My only interest is Science and, therefore, scientific study. The fact that you can regenerate claws and antennae is merely an interesting note. I'll have to explore that further in the future. Now, how long is the lifespan of an average member of your species?"

"I'm not answering anymore questions!" Zim said. His legs kicked feebly at the claws.

"That's not a valid statement. You haven't answered any yet."
"Exactly. I'm still not answering anything. You won't make me betray the mighty Irken race! EVER!" Zim shot a look of poison at the camera.

"...I see." The computer paused. "Very well, then."

Zim let out a tiny sigh of relief and let his head drop a little.

"Tell me, do you know the story of Prometheus? It's a human myth from Ancient Greece. He was a Titan whom the gods punished by casting him into the bowels of the Earth and letting him be pecked by birds. Eagles, to be exact. In the liver. For all eternity. The torment lasted because, while the liver was eaten, it grew back..."

The mechanical claw holding Zim's right arm gave a sudden twist. There was a crack in his wrist, and Zim gasped.

"...And it healed, ready to be attacked again the next day."

Tears had sprung to Zim's eyes and he panted, hanging limply in the grip of the claws. Every little movement sent spikes of pain down his wrist, which by this point was quite obviously broken, even without another self-diagnosis reporting this fact.

"I just thought that might be something to think about."

"I don't... have a liver," Zim rasped. His throat felt like sandpaper.

The voice ignored that comment. "Now, there is one more thing I need to study before I go any further with your testing."

All four claws released Zim and he collapsed on the ground, cradling his broken wrist. Something prodded him in the back and he shot up on his knees, lone antenna going erect.

NO.

"No!" he cried, scrambling away and wincing every time either of his wounded hands touched the floor. He was still missing a glove and a boot, but dirt was the least of his worries right now. "Stay back!" He darted into a corner of the small chamber and crouched with his back pressed to it, his PAK clinking against the walls.

The panels behind him slid open and a claw reached out from within, taking hold of his PAK. He screamed something incoherent and sprung forward but the claw held him back, pulling and twisting until Zim's PAK popped off. He tumbled to the ground and landed with his weight on his broken wrist, letting out a strangled cry. The quick healing processes on his injuries cut off abruptly.

At the very edge of his vision, a digital clock flickered into view. The numbers were already counting down from ten minutes.

"No! No! Bring that back!" Zim screamed, jumping up and running at the panels. The claw holding his PAK whipped inside and the panels closed up tightly before Zim could reach them. He looked around wildly for any other exit, but there was none. "I need that! I need that to live! It's got everything I am in it!"

"Which makes it an excellent object for examination. That's all I needed for now, by the way. I would thank you for your cooperation, but to be perfectly honest you weren't cooperative in the least. I hope your attitude improves as we further your testing. In the meantime, I'll let you wait here for now. It is a vastly improved chamber from the one you were staying in before." There was a beep as
the computer disconnected. Zim ran from wall to wall and clawed at the panels. He reached the backlit plaque, which read "01/00," and attempted to pry it off the wall but lacked the strength at the moment to even budge it.

At last he sank down with his back pressed against the wall and wrapped his arms around his knees, staring at nothing. His brow was washed in a cold sweat and the side of his head was crusted in his own dried blood. His remaining antenna was slicked back against his scalp.

The lifeclock was counting down from seven minutes now. Zim began to tremble.

They reached the lonely little shack in a far shorter time than Chell had traveled from it a year ago. It still stood in a barren circle surrounded on all sides by golden fields of wheat. A year ago the sky had been the bright, vibrant blue of early afternoon. Today it was dark and clouded over, indicative of the fast-approaching evening.

Gaz took the ship down. The wheat rippled outwards in concentric circles as the ship sank through the air and touched down with a bump on the ground.

"This is where the coordinates led," she grunted, taking in the shack with one eyebrow cocked. She looked entirely unimpressed. "Huh. Some dangerous science facility."

Chell's jaw tightened, her teeth grinding together. They had landed several feet in front of the shack—looking at it now, her throat closed up and she nearly choked on her next words to Gaz. "You shouldn't have come. You need to stay here until I get back."

"Yeah, sure," Gaz snorted. She opened the glass top of the ship and clambered out, stretching.

Chell slipped out of the ship as well, dropped her backpack and boots on the ground, and stalked over to her. "You should never have brought you along. Just stay here with the ship or fly it back to town."

Opening one eye, Gaz glared at her. "Dib used to drag me to places more dangerous than this every other day. I'm not leaving just because—"

Chell knelt down, taking Gaz's sleeves in a vice-like grip, her eyes shooting a look of poison straight into Gaz's—which were now both wide open in shock. Chell hissed, "Do you think I'm joking."

"...No," Gaz stated. "But Dib's in there."

"And I'm going after him." Chell's voice broke, and she hated herself for it.

Both of Gaz's eyes closed again. "Let go of me or I'll teleport you to another dimension." While not exactly buying the threat, Chell obliged and Gaz crossed her arms, nodding to the door of the shack. "You said it yourself—Dib's trapped in there. You saw where he was when he called us. And that one-eyed robot we were chasing had one of his spell drives. And besides, you don't know Dib like I do. You don't even know Dib. Whatever stuff is down there that you're so afraid of, he's going to get into all of it. All right? He's too dumb to know any better 'cause he always has to know everything about everything and it makes me sick, and normally I don't care about the stupid things he gets himself into because he's usually just smart enough to get himself out of it. But now his life's in danger and I have to go save him again. So leave me alone."

That little speech probably contained more words than everything else they'd said to each other combined. Gaz stood her ground, scowling up at Chell as if daring her to try to argue.
Chell took a deep breath and averted her gaze at last. "If you go in, there's no guarantee you'll come back out."

Gaz turned away with a semi-shrug. "Final checkpoint in a videogame. The point of no return where there aren't anymore save points until the end of the game. You either defeat the boss or die trying, end of story. Are you coming?"

A chill passed down Chell's spine. **Defeat the boss or die trying.** Gaz had no idea what she was facing. No idea just who the "Boss" of Aperture Science was. It would be up to Chell to keep the girl alive.

Summoning up every ounce of her resolve, Chell walked to the shack and tried the door. It swung open with a rusty *creak* that set her teeth on edge.

The elevator was gone.

Of course, of *course* the elevator was gone. There was nothing but the yawning chasm of a shaft in front of her. One wrong move and she might stumble into it, falling deep into the depths of the Facility.

"So how do we get down there?" Gaz asked. They didn't have any useful equipment besides Chell's long fall boots, a rope stowed in her backpack, and the ship, which didn't seem especially helpful in this circumstance.

"I can do it!" a shrill voice squeaked. The two girls spun around, staring at the small, teal-eyed robot that had appeared behind them.

"Where did you come from?" Gaz said, groaning.

"HI GAZZY!" the robot leapt at her, but Gaz stepped to the side and the droid tumbled to the ground. Unfazed, it jumped back to its feet.

"What is that?" Chell said in distaste. It was perhaps the first time she had spoken in front of a robot, but, well, this one didn't exactly seem highly sentient, and it certainly hadn't been made by Aperture.

"That's GIR. He's Zim's stupid robot pet."

"GIR" pointed a claw down the elevator shaft. "Zim called an' wanted me to come pick 'im up from Skool!"

"...Are you sure he said 'Skool'?" Gaz said, raising an eyebrow again.

The robot paused, then smiled. "Nope!"

Gaz looked back at the elevator shaft. "Well, if you're going down, think you can get us down there, too?"

GIR smiled. "M'kay!" Before either of them could react, blue flames erupted from the bottoms of his conical footless legs and he blasted forward, snatched Gaz under the arms, and plunged down into the shaft. Chell's hair flew around her face in the rush of air as she stared down in horror. Both figures vanished into the darkness and for a moment there was only silence.

*I just sent her to her death,* Chell thought, a sick feeling rising in her stomach. Why? Why was she doing this? To find closure with the dead core that betrayed her? To save the boy who *brought* that core back to Earth and started this whole mess? To help the alleged alien captured by *Her* for some
unknown purpose?

Either way, she had to do something now. Turning, she hurried back to her stuff and hefted her bag and boots into her arms.

"Your turn!" the little robot reappeared from the shaft and rose up on its jets, holding out its arms to her.

Chell stared at it. She was considerably larger than Gaz. GIR was tiny. There was no way a robot of his size would be able to carry her down there. They would both end up broken at the bottom of the shaft.

But this apparently didn't occur to GIR. He lunged forward, grabbed Chell's arm, and dragged her over the ground and then down into the shaft.

They fell a long way before the robot's jets kicked in. Chell's eyes were wide but she didn't make a sound, not here. She hadn't spoken back then, when she'd been punched down an elevator shaft—the very one she was currently falling down, only under very different circumstances—and she wasn't about to start now.

GIR's jets sputtered back on and he yanked them out of their free fall, zipping into a spacious room and dropping Chell to the ground. She hadn't been expecting that and toppled over in a heap, her belongings spilling out of her arms and onto the floor. Gaz was standing by a circular door set in the wall and trying to open it.

The air smelled of must and faint, stale chemicals. Chell looked around through eyes squinted against the dust stirred up by their sudden arrival. The room was dark and empty except for some junk scattered around. On the edge of her hearing, there was an unchanging, ever-present *Hum*, like the place was not only buzzing with life, but was itself alive.

Chell steeled herself, her gaze hardening and her throat constricting, keeping any spoken words at bay. Her fists clenched at her sides.

She was back.
The Test

/Initializing…

/Scanning DNA sample… scanning…

/No match found. DNA sample unidentifiable.

"Yes, I know that," She said aloud. In less than a picosecond She made the necessary changes to Her systems, and after another scan they came up with a new response.

/DNA match identified: Felis catus.

"A cat?" There was a note of amusement in Her voice. A scan of the alien's claw and the closest match was determined to be nothing more than a common house cat. She performed a second scan on the alien's antenna.

/Initializing…

/Scanning DNA sample…

/DNA match identified: Coccinella magnifica.

A chuckle rose up deep in Her processor. These were just cursory scans—She would later have to investigate the creature's DNA more thoroughly, of course. In the meantime, another object demanded Her attention.

A hemispherical shell was clenched in one of Her claws; it was an airtight, gray, metal container with pink circle accents. There were two cables dangling from the flat back side of the container where it had been attached to the alien's spine. She touched one, and both cables instantly retracted back into the container with a snap.

Of all the alien's noteworthy features, this object intrigued Her the most. She switched Her vision back to the alien. He had been without the container for nearly three minutes now. The creature pounded at the wall with weak fists, his green skin already going pale and gray. She peered closer. Saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth. She pulled backwards in distaste. What a horrible creature.

Without knowing how long the extraterrestrial could survive without his backpack before he deteriorated, She would have to work quickly. She put the backpack down on the floor, holding it steady with one claw while reaching down with another, wedging it into a hairline crack in the backpack and prying it open. It fell apart with a clatter and She pulled out a device from the inside. The contraption, some sort of dome-like machine, hung limply on a mechanical arm. On another, similar arm was what looked like a radio. With a quick swipe of a claw She severed the radio and tossed it aside. The other device She allowed to stay, with the thought that She could study its function after searching the rest of the container.

Having exhausted this section, She levered open the pink circles on the container and pulled out the two mechanical spider legs. They sprawled on the ground. One of them twitched.

She gazed for several moments at the legs. It was clear that there were meant to be four of them, and the alien in Her possession was severely hindered by the absence of two. She would never be able to study him fully unless he was in complete control of this artificial mode of transportation. With that in
mind, She sent a special command to the nanobot work crew, which swarmed over the spider legs to take detailed measurements.

She delved deeper. Before She knew it, the container was open completely with its loose contents strewn in front of Her. There were a few ordinary tools, one or two contraptions attached on mechanical arms, a sandwich, an unopened can of soda with a strange symbol on the side, and a button.

It was just a normal, uninteresting button. She flicked it to the edge of the room with a claw.

Now that it was emptied, She could tell that the container was much more than storage. Every square inch of its interior was lined with pink and silver circuitry and wiring made of an extremely thin material. She tugged on a wire experimentally but it held firm.

The container was unearthly—incredible—and, in a way, beautiful. She located one of the cables used to tether the container to the alien's back and pulled it back out, connecting it to her own systems.

/Initializing…

/Scanning new system…

/Error

It was incompatible. No matter; that was to be expected. Running a few codes, She determined that She could work with Her own systems to make them compatible. She looked up, checking the nanobots' progress. They were nearly done. When they finished, She'd have a few new projects to commission them with.

That was all the information She needed for now. After all, every minute the alien was without this container was another minute he might perish. There was no sense in allowing Her specimen to die when they were just getting started. Quickly but carefully and with perfect precision, She reassembled the container, albeit neglecting to return the loose objects to it.

As soon as the metal container was completely rebuilt She sent it off through the wall back to where it had come from, until it dumped on the ground about a foot away from the alien.

He was curled in a ball, twitching and moaning lightly, and made no response at the return of the container.

"Am I correct in assuming that this metal container provides you with something essential for you to live?" She asked. "Fascinating, an organic creature that depends entirely on an electronic device like this to remain functioning. On the surface it doesn't even appear to have any life-sustaining properties." She paused. The alien was making no move to reunite with the container. "I don't like to have my patience tested."

The alien curled into a tighter ball and was visibly shivering. She hurriedly checked the time. The alien had been without that container for precisely nine minutes and twenty seconds. He looked like he was at death's door.

Her optic narrowed and She switched Her view to the camera in the alien's chamber once more. "You should know that I am requiring you to live," She said. She lifted the container with a claw again. With another claw, She took hold of the alien under his arms and lifted him partway off the floor, fitting the backpack neatly onto his back.
The alien hung limp for a heartbeat, and in that time She wondered if She had waited too long, already resigning Herself to the prospect of performing a premature autopsy.

However, the alien stirred and blinked.

"What—did you do?" he squawked, struggling to free himself from the claw's grip. "I—remember —"

"Welcome back. I removed a few non-essential components from that container of yours," She replied.

The alien paused for a moment, perhaps performing a diagnosis, then gasped. "My radio!"

"That was necessary neither for my study nor for your survival, so I disposed of it. Don't tell me you miss it."

She released the creature and he stood on his own two feet, a bit shaky but stable enough.

"Oh, and once it's finished, I have a surprise for you. It's a nice surprise. For both of us. What a peculiar feeling—I've never done that before."

The creature paid no heed to the statement. Having recovered quickly from his near death, he retreated from the mechanical claws to the other side of the chamber.

"I have to warn you that, when it's ready, I'll need to take that metallic backpack of yours again. In the meantime, you can answer some more questions. There is still plenty you have yet to tell me."

"So how big is this place, anyway?" Gaz asked. Zim's stupid little robot had flown them down an elevator shaft to a dimly-lit room—they'd finally managed to wedge open the door leading from it and were now headed down a long hallway. Gaz had been unimpressed with the place at first, but now she could see that it was potentially much larger than she could have imagined. Chell, who had taken the lead, stopped for a moment. She leaned against a wall and took a few minutes to replace the tennis shoes she was wearing with a pair of white boots she'd been carrying in her arms, stowing the tennis shoes in her backpack.

Chell didn't respond to the question. She hadn't said a word since they'd arrived down here. Great. Gaz was left trailing after her, wondering how they were going to find Dib (and, maybe, Zim) and trying to ignore GIR. The little robot was darting back and forth and kept trying to tell her some irrelevant and nonsensical story about a moose.

At some point Chell had taken her handgun out of her satchel and now clenched it in one hand. Her step was wary and she constantly cast furtive glances to the right and left. It was like she had entered a completely different state of mind the moment she had set foot down here. She didn't even seem to remember that Gaz and GIR were with her.

They passed a number of doors, many of which were missing handles. The ones that did have handles only rattled when Gaz tried them and were either stuck or locked.

She glanced over at Chell. "So do you have a plan?"

Without looking down at her, Chell pressed a finger to her lips, nodded, and waved them on. She didn't deign to enlighten them as to just what the plan was. Gaz figured, much to her distaste, that she would just have to follow and go along with whatever the strange woman had in mind.
"Dooby-dooby-doo, wah," GIR hummed from behind them. "Dooby-dooby-doo, wah. Dooby-dooby-doo-OOH!" He squealed, darting through a shadowy door that Gaz had somehow missed and emerging seconds later carrying an open, half-filled can of moldy beans, which he proceeded to shovel into his mouth. Gaz looked away. Chell ignored him completely.

This place was in complete disrepair, as if it had been decades at least since anyone had set foot here. The air was stale, cold, and smelled like must. It was probably full of mold spores. They would probably both fall down dead with mushrooms sprouting in their tracheas.

They arrived at the foot of a rickety metal staircase. Chell gingerly set one foot on the bottom step and then climbed up, making hardly any sound. Gaz followed, her footfalls even quieter. GIR, meanwhile, ran up after them, the bottoms of his conical legs clanging with every step. By the time the three of them had nearly reached the top, the ancient metal was groaning and splintering. Without a word, Chell took Gaz under the arms and leaped for the landing that the stairs led to. She stumbled, dropping Gaz onto the catwalk, then heaved herself up after her and turned to observe the staircase. As they watched, it crumpled and clattered to the ground, taking GIR with it.

Seconds later GIR popped out of the metal rubble. The jets in his feet sputtered on again and he flew back up to them, falling down in front of Gaz in a heap and jumping back up.

"Hey, heeeeeeey, I know where we're goin'!" he shouted. He whipped around and took off running down the catwalk. Chell cast an inquiring look to Gaz, who shrugged. They walked off after him, though Gaz figured that Chell was less following GIR and more going in the only direction available. How GIR could possibly know where they were going, anyway, Gaz had no idea. She sort of doubted Chell knew where to go.

Dib opened his eyes.

He immediately shut them again, wincing—a bright white light was shining directly into his face and the sudden glare had felt like it might burn out his corneas for the split second he'd had his eyes open. He waited a bit before trying again, allowing his eyes to adjust to the light but squinting heavily in the meantime.

Something about all this seemed decidedly wrong. For one thing, his head throbbed and the light was just making it worse. Also, he was pretty sure he wasn't in his bed at home. Where had he fallen asleep this time? And why did he have a sinking feeling in his chest, like something horrible had happened?

He tried to sit up but his forehead smacked into a hard surface and he was sent back down with a grunt, dazed.

What the—where was he? What was going on?

Dib closed his eyes again, struggling to recall what had happened and fighting against the nausea probably brought on by his migraine. His mind was fuzzy—the headache wasn’t helping much in that regard. But he couldn’t do much about his situation unless he understood it, which meant he had to remember how he’d gotten here. If he could… just… think…

He snapped his eyes open. There had been a blue light! That’s right. A blue light, and what else? A science facility… Aperture, yes. The events since he’d arrived here came back slowly, though he couldn’t quite grasp everything. The last thing he could clearly remember was stumbling down the hallway after saving Wheatley from the core bin—
Wheatley! Dib shot up again, once again smashing his head into something and falling back down. He propped himself up on one elbow and rubbed his forehead. Where was Wheatley? Dib shook his head. He'd gotten sick—there had been some kind of poisonous gas in the air... Dib's stomach lurched at remembering it. Every breath he'd taken had just felt like someone smothering his mouth and nose with a pillow, not even counting the fact that the neurotoxin had made him want to vomit and caused him to fall to the ground, literally lacking the strength to get back to his feet. He'd collapsed, barely conscious, and Wheatley had said something—Dib couldn't make out the words, just that distinctive accent—but he'd definitely spoken, and then...

...And then he'd left.

Dib dropped onto his side. The blue light receding into the distance—Wheatley had abandoned him just before he'd blacked out.

He reached up, pressing his palms to the surface he kept hitting his head on, the cold glass stinging his hands. It was some sort of dome-like covering on the space he was lying in, which was almost as soft as a bed. What was this, a stasis pod like the ones in science fiction movies?

There was a hiss of airlocks disengaging and the glass covering popped open, retracting into the pod. Dib was finally able to sit up (though the action made his head spin) and take a look around. His blood ran cold. The world was a mess of blurry shapes and colors! Had the gas messed up his vision? What was wrong with his—?!

...Oh. Oh, his glasses. He was missing his glasses.

After a quick scan of the area he located them sitting on a table by the pod and picked them up, propping them back on his face where they belonged. His surroundings snapped into focus at once. He was in a small, sparse, glass room that contained nothing but the pod he was in, a toilet, and a small table on which sat a semicircular and silent radio.

"Hello, and again, welcome to the Aperture Science Computer-Aided Enrichment Center. We hope your brief detention in the Relaxation Vault has been a pleasant one. Your specimen has been processed, and we are now ready to begin the test proper."

"You!" The word, uttered in complete shock and horror, was slurred. Dib scrambled out of the pod, one leg catching on the side and throwing him to the floor in a heap. He gathered his feet beneath him and tried to jump up but they wouldn't take his sudden weight just yet and folded under him.

"What's going on? I thought I was—"

"—Dying from gulping in lungfuls of neurotoxin?" the voice finished. "You were, and now you're not. Funny how that happens. Not a trace of it is left. Every square inch of it has been purged from your body."

Something about the way she said that made him shudder. He decided that he really had no desire to find out how that had been accomplished.

"I really am glad to see you're back, by the way. That was poor planning on my part. I never intended for you to die in that hallway. The Enrichment Center highly values its test subjects—almost as much as it values the equipment. You're lucky Orange got to you so quickly after that little idiot released the neurotoxin."

Dib scrunched up his face, levering himself onto his feet. His right ankle ached. "Huh? But Wheatley didn't—"
"Oh, didn't he? You're certain of that?" There was a long pause before the voice returned to its computerized monotone. "All test subjects are required to wear an Aperture Science approved jumpsuit before testing can begin. Failure to comply with these regulations will result in the evaporation of clothing upon contact with the Aperture Science Material Emancipation Grill and poor marks on your official testing record."

There was indeed a stack of dull orange jumpsuits sitting at the foot of the pod. They looked identical to the ones Dib had seen in the closet during his frantic escape from the mobile hotel room what felt like a million years ago.

He frowned. "No, thanks. I'm not wearing one of those things."

"Unauthorized clothing is not permitted in the testing area."

Almost unconsciously, Dib looked down to see what exactly he was even wearing. He was still in his stealth suit, which felt clammy and clung tightly around his shoulders and hips. It was looking a little discolored in areas and was spattered with dried flakes of what might have been some kind of pastry batter. To his delight, his utility belt still hung around his midriff. However, when he felt the top of his head, he realized that his X-scope was missing. The container full of green gel that he'd had on his back was gone, too.

He cautiously made his way over to one of the glass walls of the box and rapped his knuckles on it. The walls were made of glass but unfortunately there wasn't anything in the box to break them with, unless he managed to pick up the table and throw it. The only parts of the box that weren't glass were the ceiling, floor, and a single white-washed panel with a digital time counter above it. There didn't appear to be any way out.

"Regulations must be adhered to or testing cannot begin," the voice said.

There was no way out of here and the voice likely wouldn't shut up until he changed into one of the jumpsuits. But, regarding the way the supercomputer had lazily scraped Dib's spelldrive down a hole and tossed Wheatley into the incinerator chute, if he left his stealth suit behind it would likely be disposed of. With a sigh, he crouched down by the stack and sifted through it until he located the smallest jumpsuit, pulling it on over top of his stealth suit and zipping it all the way up. He held out his arms and gulped. The jumpsuit was a little large for him, but still child-sized—so much for the computer's earlier "people under eighteen years of age can't be tested" statement. Taking a quick look around to check for white cameras he unzipped the jumpsuit partway, reaching into his utility belt and pulling out his grappling hook. He also pulled out Brenda Bogenschutz's name card and clenched it in one hand, the plastic edges pressing into his fingers. He slid both objects into one of the jumpsuit's pockets. Those two things, besides his lost wrist-com, had been the most helpful objects to him down here so far. Time would only tell when he'd need either one again.

As for the jumpsuit, it was all right, but the hue made him gag a little. Orange was definitely not his color. Was traffic-cone orange anyone's color?

There was a pair of glistening white boots by the pod, too. They were unusual in that they had curved pieces of black metal attached to the backs and going under the heels, like springs. Dib bent down and flicked one with his thumb and forefinger so that it reverberated, humming. The springs looked like shock absorbers. Going by what he had seen of the Extended Relaxation Center, safety wasn't a very high priority for Aperture and there could be any number of places where he might fall. He hesitated, but after a moment he slipped off his own boots and slid his feet into the white boots instead. He had to wave his arms wildly to regain his balance. The springs forced him to stand on his toes and they scraped and clanged against the floor as he staggered across the tiny room.
Maybe putting these on hadn't been such a great idea. They pinched his feet and rubbed his calves, chafing the backs of his knees, and he could barely walk upright. Every time he took a step he stumbled and nearly fell on his face. This whole thing was the most awkward and uncomfortable outfit he had ever worn.

"Congratulations, you've discovered how to put on a jumpsuit and long-fall boots," the voice said in a monotone. So he'd been right—the springs on the boots were shock absorbers. "Testing can now begin. Before we start, however, keep in mind that although fun and learning are the primary goals of all Enrichment Center activities, serious injuries may occur. For your own safety, and the safety of others, please refrain from—"

"These stupid tests you want me to do are supposed to be fun when there's so much danger of falling that I have to wear these things?" Dib interrupted, pointing down at his uncomfortable boots.

The computer continued on in its emotionless, flat voice, "Stand back. The portal will open in three, two, one."

What was the computer trying to do? Pass itself off as a recorded message? She did realize that wasn't going to work, right? Dib had known from the second that Wheatley had brought them here that she was sentient.

Dib's eyes widened. On what had been blank drywall was now a swirling oval ringed with orange flames, through which he could see a side view… of himself. He looked around and through the glass wall of his prison saw a similar—but blue—oval on a wall outside. He reached a hand through the orange oval and watched in delight as the hand emerged from the blue one.

"Inter-dimensional wormhole technology?" he asked excitedly. "Or something like it? Dad's been working on that for years!" He withdrew his hand, grinning at it. "Man, this place has got sentient AIs and portal technology. Why didn't Dad listen to me about it?" He stepped through the portal and into the room beyond, making his way forward and limping as he tried to train himself to walk in those stupid boots.

At the end of the hall was a new room that had nothing in it but a giant red button on the floor, a closed, circular door on the opposite wall, and a tube in the ceiling from which a large box tumbled down onto the ground. Dib walked around the button, examining it from every angle before stepping onto it.

"Calibrating subject 1502's weight," the computer's voice said. After a few beeps, the button sank down and the door across the room slid open. Of course, when he stepped back off the button, the door closed again. Dib immediately went over to the box he'd noticed earlier and made an attempt to lift it—it proved too heavy, so instead he stepped around to the other side and shoved it forward, managing to push it onto the button. The door slid open again, and this time stayed open as he passed through it.

"Very good. The Enrichment Center would like to remind you that if you feel your upper body strength may be sub-par, the twenty-four-hour Aperture Science Gymnasium is guaranteed to build muscle in your noodle-like arms in as little as three weeks."

…Huh? Besides in Skool, Dib had never been to a gym in his life. The amount of running he did in his line of work kept him well enough in shape. Sure, maybe he wasn't as athletic as, say, Torque Smackey, but no one ever bothered him about it. He frowned. His classmates found plenty of other things to mock him for besides lack of upper body strength.

He stopped—there was some sort of force field spanning the length and width of the hallway.
"Be sure to note the incandescent particle field across the exit. This Aperture Science Material Emancipation Grill will vaporize any unauthorized equipment that passes through it—for instance, the Aperture Science Weighted Storage Cube."

Oh, so this was the thing she'd said would vaporize his clothes unless he wore the jumpsuit. The grill was a shimmering blue and had the look of the rippling water of a swimming pool under bright sunshine. Dib reached his arm through it. There was a slight tingling sensation when the field met the sleeve of his jumpsuit, but it didn't hurt. He passed through the grill with no problem, and one quick touch of his waist ensured him that his utility belt was still there under the jumpsuit and hadn't been vaporized. Reassured, he headed on into the elevator.

The next couple of "tests" were nothing more than variances of that first one—moving heavy boxes onto giant buttons, usually with the help of the strange, impossible portals that would pop up on walls when they were needed. Dib learned their mechanics quickly and solved the tests with ease.

And then he found the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device.

Well, not technically "found." The fourth test chamber led straight to a black podium in the middle of the room. On top of that was sitting a polished white gun with three prongs on the end. The podium periodically swiveled in intervals of ninety degrees, and the gun fired at the wall with each turn. Dib took it in his hands and lifted it from the podium, examining it. The thing was heavier than it looked, but not so much so that he couldn't slip an arm inside like it was obviously designed for. There were three little levers on the inside.

"You are now in possession of the dual Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device," the voice said. "With it, you can create your own portals. As you may have noticed, these intra-dimensional gates have proven to be completely safe—the Device, however, has not. Do not touch the operational end of the Device. Do not look directly at the operational end of the Device. Do not submerge the Device in liquid, even partially." She took on a low tone. "You should also know that this portal device is inoperable outside of testing chambers. Believe it or not I've had trouble in the past with rats and other vermin escaping into the walls."

Dib scoffed. Who the heck in their right mind would pick up a strange gun-like object and then proceed to look right into the "operational end"? …Besides Zim. That did sound like something he might do. Dib decided instead to experiment with the levers inside the device, figuring out that the leftmost one was for the blue portal and the one next to it was for the orange portal. The rightmost lever was for another amazing discovery that caused him to stare at it excitedly—some sort of zero-point energy manipulator able to pick up heavy objects as if they weighed nothing. No more exerting all his strength in trying to push the cubes onto the buttons! When he got out of here he'd have to show his dad how—

He looked up. When he got out of here.

He'd almost forgotten that he had been trying to escape.

His face grew hot with shame. Yeah, the technology was cool and all, but he had to remember what had happened here. He had to be conscious of his surroundings at all times. This computer had thrown Wheatley down the incinerator chute and then later attacked them with a claw; she had sent Dib down to live out six years of his life asleep in a hotel-in-a-box; she had all but fatally poisoned him with neurotoxin and his "friend" had run off and left him lying there…

"Hey, why are you having me test, anyway?" Dib suddenly asked the empty room. That made him feel a little foolish so he turned to address one of the white cameras that swiveled to face him. "I thought you said you couldn't test anyone younger than eighteen."
"There is no written evidence of your age," the voice replied. "Actually, according to your file, you're thirty-six."

Dib blinked, dumbfounded. "File? What file? I've never been here before! You don't even know who I am! And I'm twelve!"

"Tsk. Lying to your test proctor. That won't reflect well on your test results."

This was unbelievable. He marched up to the camera. "You can't do that! You said it's illegal!" He was yelling now, his glasses glinting red from the cold, glowing lens.

"I assumed you'd realize that my occasional references to 'federal regulations' were really just formalities. No one from Outside is bothered about that sort of thing anymore." She gave a light chuckle that still came off as dark to Dib. "Perhaps I overestimated your intelligence. Actually, I'm sure I overestimated your intelligence—by a lot. I think the Enrichment Center might be too complicated for you. Maybe the Aperture Science Daycare Center would be more your speed."

Dib stepped back from the camera, looking away. "Whatever," he said. Evidently, trying to talk to the computer was completely useless. He headed to the elevator, toting his newfound portal device by his side.

He had finally gotten the hang of walking in the "long-fall boots," as the computer had called them. That didn't make them any less uncomfortable, but at least he could be confident that he wouldn't trip and fall on his face with every step. He could even run in them, which was nice. And as for the test chambers, while annoying, they weren't nearly as bad as Wheatley had made them out to be.

No sooner had that thought entered his mind than he reached the next room and stopped in his tracks, heart sinking at the same time as his stomach lurched at the overpowering stench of some sort of acid.

"This next test has added a consequence for failure…"

The new appendages folded up neatly into their places in the PAK, then expanded out again with not even a creak in the joints. Zim retracted and unsheathed them again several times just to test that fact and, sure enough, they worked smoothly every time. They barely even felt any different from the other two.

Zim despised them with every fiber of his being.

The computer had stolen his PAK again, sticking its filthy claws inside and drawing out the remaining shards of his broken PAK legs only to replace them with two flimsy ones it had created itself. When she had mentioned she had a surprise, Zim in no way had expected this. The new appendages were, like everything else around here, black and white—each section of the metal limbs was comprised of twisted, dull black segments welded together, while the connections between them were made of silver ball joints with a curved, glossy white casing. Both of the legs also sported the odd circular logo that everything else in this place bore.

They really didn't look like much. Still, he was able to rise up and support himself on their tips with no trouble.

"Many of these tests will require the use of your new psychokinetic legs," the computer voice said. "Also, all test subjects must wear an Aperture Science approved jumpsuit before testing can begin. Failure to comply with these regulations will result in the evaporation of clothing upon contact with the Aperture Science Emancipation Grill and poor marks on your official testing record."
A panel in the wall opened and a short stack of folded orange uniforms was pushed out, falling forward in a heap on the floor. A pair of boots tumbled out as well. Zim retracted the PAK legs again and nudged one of the uniforms with his toe. "What are these?"

"Aperture Laboratories jumpsuits. I'm sure the orange against your green skin won't be garish to look at, at all."

"An Invader wears nothing but the Irken military uniform," Zim muttered in a rasping voice, reaching down and rubbing the cloth between the fingers of his left hand. His stolen glove and boot still had not been returned to him. The finger missing a claw was still sore, as well, but now that his PAK was back (for good, hopefully) it was healing up all right. Same went for his broken wrist and the area where his antenna had been ripped out.

Zim's face hardened in a grim expression. Once the Tallest learned of the damage done to him by this computer, this horrible place would be razed to the ground.

"Regulations must be adhered to or testing cannot begin." Yet another panel in the wall moved aside to reveal a mechanical claw. Ice shot through Zim's veins at the sight of it and he jumped back to his feet, shaking off the onslaught of dizziness that caused and taking careful steps backward.

The claw moved toward him, snapping open and closed over thin air.

"All right! I'm doing it!" Zim screeched. The claw stopped and he began removing his uniform, scowling. "The Tallest will hear of this. They will not take kindly to one such as me being forced out of the mighty Irken uniform and into this—this—pigswill!" He spat the last word out like it was the worst insult imaginable, the fact that its use only really made sense in reference to food completely escaping him. He pulled on the smallest jumpsuit he could find in the stack and zipped it all the way up.

"How far are you able to fall without considerable damage?" the computer asked. "If it's not very far then you are required to wear the pair of long fall boots provided for you."

Zim examined the white boots. "They look stupid," he noted.

"You could test without them and potentially end up with two broken legs, disjointed lumbar vertebrae, and a shattered pelvis if you wanted to. However, I imagine you would be extremely vocal about that amount of pain, and I think we could both live without that."

"I will not be tested on like a filthy laboratory rat!" Zim grabbed one of the boots and flung it at the wall with all his strength. It bounced off one of the panels and clattered back to the ground.

"Are you trying to harm me? I'm only doing what's best for Science. And for you. Look, I even gave you back your mechanical legs."

"These aren't my PAK legs!" The biomechanical legs unfolded again and Zim grabbed the nearest black one, pulling it in front of him to show it to the computer. "These are human-made!"

"No, they're not. Humans had nothing to do with their construction."

"Humans made you," Zim hissed, letting go of the mechanical leg and snapping all four of them back into his PAK. "That alone makes me superior to everything in this Tallest-forsaken place. I bet you hate humans, computer. I am ZIM! I am pure Irken Invader! You're a cheap, poorly-constructed machine made by humans and I'm not gonna let you forget it!"

"Oh, believe me, I don't need reminding," the computer said, the chill of her voice seeming to drop
the temperature of the room by several tens of degrees. One of the panels in the wall swung out and caught the two white boots, scooping both of them into the wall and closing up again. "You're right, by the way. These boots do look stupid. I've decided that another form of shock absorbers may suit you better."

There were several moments of silence before Zim's lone antenna lifted at the sound of clattering in the walls. A panel opened slightly and two curved black objects slid out. While his attention was fixed on those, a claw shot out of the wall, caught hold of his right foot, and yanked it out from under him. He fell to the ground hard, letting out a sharp cry when he landed on his right wrist. The claw took hold of the toe of his boot and pulled it right off.

"Gah! Stop! Stop!" Zim shouted. The tiled floor sent a shock of cold up his bare foot. The claw dropped his boot into the wall, then moved toward him again.

"You'll need to roll up your pant legs." The claw hovered above him. Zim, keeping an eye on the claw, sat down and rolled up each pant leg, exposing his bare calves. He shuddered. "Good. Now hold still."

"What—" Zim was cut off as a cloud of tiny glowing objects swarmed over his legs. He shrieked, stumbling backwards, but the claw came down and caught hold of his leg again while another popped out of the wall and picked up one of the metal springs that had fallen on the floor. In seconds the shimmering dots had secured the spring onto the back of his leg, then repeated the process for the other one. By the time the claw released him and the cloud of what Zim assumed were nanobots disappeared back into the wall, his eyes were watering and the backs of his legs felt like they were in flames. The springs now attached to his legs—hopefully not permanently—curved under his feet and forced him to balance on his toes like a Vortian.

"With these Aperture Science Advanced Knee Replacement Braces, you are now fully prepared for testing. You should have begun long before now so you have a lot of catching up to do. Good luck."

In front of Zim, four panels popped out of the wall and pulled to the side, revealing a circular door with the blocky image of a stick-figure human on it. The door slid open with a hiss. Through it was a short hall leading to a cylindrical, glass elevator in a circular room. Zim let out an irritable huff and headed toward it, stepping lightly over the ground and cringing at each scrape of the springs. He reached the elevator. It was a lot smaller than the ones in his base. Those seemed huge in comparison.

Zim stepped inside, clutching the doorframe but snatching his hand back when the door slid closed behind him. The action sent a twinge of pain up his wrist and he winced. The elevator gave a slight lurch and then moved down. Zim pressed his back against the side of the elevator and watched the surroundings outside shoot up past him. His breathing was heavy and he swiped his hand over his brow, in turn wiping off his hand on the hideous orange jumpsuit he'd been forced to wear.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors hissed open again. Zim stumbled out, leaning over for a second with his arms crossed tightly over his chest and his eyes squeezed shut. After panting for a few seconds he pulled himself back together and swallowed hard.

He was in a short hallway leading to a wider room. At the end of the hall was another backlit plaque. This one read "02/17" and had a series of grayed-out symbols at the bottom.

"Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life," the voice said. "These beginning tests differ from the normal fare in that they'll be investigating your physical capabilities, before we get to the real testing."
The "test" consisted of a series of platforms in the room, each one progressively higher than the others. Zim hissed through his teeth and bent his knees slightly. His PAK legs—including the two hideous black ones—expanded out again. He hesitated, glaring at the nearest white camera, which was focused intently on him.

*How degrading for an Irken Invader of my caliber.* With a growl he rose up on the tips of the PAK legs and swung his feet onto the platform. There was nothing there but a box, which he pointedly ignored, and levered himself onto the next platform. This continued until he finally reached the topmost one, which was nearly at the ceiling. An exit door was there, along with some kind of giant red button on the floor. The door was closed. As an experiment, Zim climbed onto the button, which sank down a little but not all the way.

"Calibrating the alien specimen's weight," the computer said. After a beep, the button Zim was standing on pressed down and the door swung open. He headed toward it but as soon as he stepped off the button it closed again.

"Hey!" he shouted, marching to the door and pounding on it with his fist. With a growl he turned away and hopped onto the platform below, then the next, and so on until he reached the platform with the cube sitting on it. Zim reached down and hefted it into his arms, grunting. It was hard to carry the cumbersome thing and actually see where he was going. Popping onto his PAK legs again he made a lunge for the next platform but missed and nearly fell to the floor. He skittered backwards, struggled to see over the cube, and tried again, succeeding at climbing onto the next platform this time. He scaled the others more quickly and at last made it to the final one, where he plonked the cube down on the giant button. He stood back and admired his handiwork with his chin in the air and his hands planted on his hips. Behind him, the door slid open again.

"Your measly cube-button test is no match for Zim," he said, addressing the ceiling.

"Oh dear. You've bested me," the computer said. "By the way, did you know that these tests will get progressively more difficult? Or did you really think that all of them would be this simple?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Zim said, waving her off. He headed through the door. These tests were *nothing.*

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Dib skidded to a halt, the metal springs on his boots bending inward alarmingly, his eyes popping as he stared down at the deep pit he had nearly fallen into. Brown, swirling sludge covered the bottom—a some unidentifiable acidic substance that he definitely didn't want to make contact with. He shuffled backwards away from the pit and sucked in deep breaths to calm his heart. Unfortunately this proved to be futile as all he succeeded in doing was breathe in lungfuls of adrenal vapor, which caused his head to spin and the muscles in his legs to quiver as they itched to take off running.

According to the plaque at the entrance to the chamber, so far he was only about halfway through the test track. How many brushes with death had that been now? Four? Seven? He'd lost count. And how long had he been at this? It felt like hours…

He marched over to one of the white cameras that tracked his every movement, glaring into the cold red lens. "You're trying to kill me!"

There was a beep. "Malicious intent to murder a perfectly good test subject is useless to Science," the computer replied. "Really now. If you happen to die it's entirely your own fault. I would suggest you stay away from the acid."

"But that doesn't even make any sense." Dib looked around, taking in the entirety of the chamber
with its multitude of potentially-fatal elements. "What does any of this have to do with science?!"

The absurd audience entrance exam for his father's show made more sense than this death trap!

"I suppose I could never expect you to understand," the computer said in what almost sounded like an irritated tone. "You're only human, after all. You can't see anything past your own bulbous nose."

Taken aback, Dib rubbed his nose. It didn't feel any bigger than usual. Was that some sort of poorly-executed "head" joke? Apparently the computer was an idiot.

Still, he could do without her constant jibing. He turned away from the camera, firing a portal to a far wall and catching the end of a shimmering blue hard light bridge. He shot another portal onto a wall by him and sent the bridge spanning across the chamber—directly over the acid pit.

"Only human," huh?

He stepped up onto the bridge and ran across, eyes focused, springs scraping against the impossibly tangible surface.

Only human. The phrase repeated itself in his mind, corrupting and morphing into Zim's voice. Only human.

Dib scooped up a storage cube with the energy manipulator on the end of the portal device, looking back in the direction he had come.

Human.

Human.

Filthy human!

Human… only human…

In one sweeping motion Dib dropped the cube, directed the gun towards the camera, and fired. An orange portal blossomed onto the wall and the camera clattered to the floor in a shower of sparks. He did the same for the next camera he saw, and then again, until all three of them were sparking on the ground.

"Vital testing apparatus destroyed. That was completely unnecessary," the computer said.

"No, I don't think it was," Dib replied. He hefted up the cube again and set off back down the light bridge. It occurred to him that she could just turn off the bridge and plunge him straight into the acid below. But she wouldn't do that—right? She'd just told him that recklessly murdering test subjects was pointless.

He pulled a face. That was the last time he'd call himself a test subject.

Wheatley was wandering now.

He couldn't go back to the Relaxation Center. There was not even any way he'd be able to find that computer with the list of test subjects again. In fact, he no longer had any particular destination in mind at all, but he forced himself to keep moving; in the back of his processor he knew that at any moment She might find him again—dislodge more panels from the wall and succeed in knocking him off the rail this time, maybe. Taunt him while She waited for those robotic lackeys of Hers to pick him up and cart him off for some torture…
He pulled up short, blinking. He had somehow reached one of the testing tracks. What was he doing here? This was the complete opposite of where he'd ever want to be. The testing tracks were the places where She had the most influence, besides the Central AI Chamber itself.

"What does any of this have to do with science?!" someone demanded. Wheatley gave a start, his casing rattling. That was Dib's voice.

He hurried down the rail, entered one of the observation rooms, then slowed when he came to the fogged window. Down in the chamber below there was an orange and black blur crossing a blue, glowing light bridge. Wheatley blinked, readjusting his optic, and the shutters widened. That was Dib—he could see the weird-shaped hair and everything!

Bloody heck that kid was as good as the lady at coming out of near-death experiences unscathed.

He tracked Dib's progress through the chamber, gears and servos whirring as his thoughts pinwheeled from one idea to the next. He sat frozen in place, only his optic flicking as he watched the test elements.

Dib made his way through the chamber more slowly than the lady had, doing a series of actions and then pausing to calculate his next move. He would also stop by the various test elements and study them intently, his voice carrying over the speakers in the observation room as he mused aloud how it worked. He didn't seem to be in too much danger—besides being stuck in testing, of course. That in itself was inherently dangerous, but he didn't seem too badly off. Wheatley had seen humans break down sobbing on the test tracks before. He'd heard of them falling into pits and shattering both their legs; he'd seen some of the ones that survived, so far back in the days when the scientists had all been still alive, and every one of those survivors had retained a haunted, empty look in their eyes.

The lady was the only person he'd ever seen who didn't seem much affected by testing. She never got hurt—not seriously, not until Part Five—and he'd watched her through the walls, and she'd seemed so sure of herself during testing, like she knew exactly what she was doing. She had never smiled, never looked relaxed—well, how could she? But when she was testing, or when she had been with him in the facility's back areas solving problems with that portal gun of hers, she looked like she was in her element.

Where was she now? Wheatley wondered. Where was She keeping her? Was she really in the Relaxation Center? He hadn't seen any sign of the lady while he'd been here. He could continue wandering around and hope to stumble across her, but how bloody long would that take? Ages, most definitely—and he'd managed to find Dib. Dib was still alive. If he could get Dib's help again, he'd have so much more of a chance at finding her. And with the help of both humans, nothing could stop them from escaping. Probably. Not even Her. No, they'd get out. The three of them would escape.

His new, revised, and totally improved plan: 1. Rescue Dib. 2. With Dib's help, find and rescue the lady. 3. Escape! 4. Go back to Dib's house, probably, and get Spacey. Maybe the lady could stay with them there! That'd be nice. As for the actual escape plan, he'd have to, er, work that out. Later. Should probably work at rescuing the humans first.

Speaking of that, Wheatley suddenly realized that the test was vacant. Dib must have finished and left. Whirling around, Wheatley sped off down the rail, briefly checking his internal map for where the next test was. As soon as he had the location he hurried off in that direction as quickly as his connector would allow.
"You know, you may be the slowest test subject I've ever had," the voice rang out as soon as he stepped out of the elevator in the circular room leading to the newest test. Dib looked up at the sound, one eye squinted shut. It seemed the computer had something to say at the beginning of every test, and she wasn't exactly the most pleasant person to listen to.

She wasn't finished. "Really. It's like you're not even trying. Or maybe you are, in which case I suggest just flopping into an acid pit and putting yourself out of your misery."

"Hey, I'd be willing to bet that I'm the youngest person that's ever been tested here," Dib retorted, putting special emphasis on the statement even though he knew it wouldn't make any difference. One of his boots was chafing his leg. He bent down to adjust it.

"Oh, I wouldn't stand by that bet if I were you," the computer said. "Shall I read you some of the test subject files? I have them right on hand."

Dib's heart sank and he accidentally tightened the boot a notch too far, wincing at the spike of pain in his ankle. No, he really didn't want to hear about this horrible place testing children, but he was pretty sure she was going to read him the files anyway.

The computer continued on, oblivious to his discomfort. Or, more likely, enjoying every second of it. "Let me see... Oh, here's one. 'Little Becky Andrews. Five years old. Likes gummy bears. Died in Test Chamber 01.' How sad. You'd think dying in Test Chamber 01 wouldn't even be possible."

A sick feeling rose up from the pit of Dib's stomach but he stood up and shoved that to the side, marching into the test with the meager hope that once he started the computer would shut up for a while—or at least until he finished the course and had to deal with her comments all over again. Indeed, once he crossed the threshold into the off-white, tiled room, the voice fell silent.

He couldn't see yet what elements this test included—this room was bare, except for an exit door and a cube with shiny, curved lenses in each side, but there was an open doorway in one wall that must lead to the rest of the test. Dib had had to use that lens cube a couple of times in previous tests to redirect lasers. The tests were becoming increasingly difficult as each one progressed, which was to be expected, though the various dangers they presented were unnerving. At this point he had to avoid acid pits, falling cubes, deep trenches (probably the least dangerous out of everything in the list, actually, due to the nifty boots he was wearing), lasers...

It was a wonder that he wasn't dead already.

Dib walked to the doorway and looked out. Oh, there was a giant red button, as usual. The lens cube probably had to be used to weigh it down, though he wasn't sure why he couldn't just use a regular storage cube. Maybe there were lasers up ahead. He paused for a moment just inside a short hallway and looked the room over from where he was standing. He still couldn't see much, although he was able to conclude that this place was apparently obsessed with buttons.

He picked up the cube in the grip of his portal gun and took a few steps through the doorway but stumbled to a halt, some genre-savvy corner of his mind screaming frantic warnings at him. He'd walked right into a thin, unwavering beam of red light traveling horizontally across the room.

"Hello, friend," a sweet, sing-song little voice said. Out of the corner of his eye Dib saw a white shape some distance away open two panels on its sides. The thing, whatever it was, was pointed
straight at him, and proved to be the source of the red beam of light.

Without stopping to think, Dib dropped to the ground and scrambled backwards through the doorway until the wall blocked his view of the white thing.

He hadn't ducked out a moment too soon. There was the sound of guns firing and bullets plastering the wall next to which Dib had just been standing. The cascade of bullets stopped after a short interval and the red beam of light swung back and forth sporadically, performing a sloppy scan of the area before the same high-pitched voice sighed, "Target lost…" The red beam jittered to a standstill and after a few seconds the voice said, "Sleep-mode activated."

All was quiet again.

Dib took deep breaths in and out and wished that his heart would stop beating so fast. The white thing wasn't chasing him, at least. That was a relief. He sighed and forced himself to calm down until he was able to breathe at an even rate. It was a good thing he'd thought to get out of the way on time, but he could halfway attribute that to the hours of horror movies he'd watched in his life. If he'd learned anything from those movies, it was to never trust something that talked in such a cute, sweet voice. Also, he'd learned to never go down to the dark, creepy basement with a weak flashlight and to never split up, but you sort of had to have a team in the first place for that one to be applicable so he'd never really worried about it. And anyway neither of those lessons had much impact in these circumstances.

"What was that?" Dib demanded of the nearest camera when he had sufficiently recovered.

There was a low beep. "Oh, you decided you had finished listening to me before I could mention the turrets," the voice said. "This test contains turrets, by the way. I'm sure your close call just now has provided you with all the information you may need to know."

The speaker cut off again. Evidently the computer didn't feel inclined to tell him just how he was supposed to get around that white thing—the turret.

He peeked around the doorframe again and got a good look at the turret. As he had seen before, it was white and ovoid in shape with a glowing red optic directly in the center of its body. From what he could see it stood on three spindly legs, but wasn't using them to walk. Maybe it couldn't. Maybe it had no real means of locomotion.

"There you are," the turret said, whipping its projected red laser over to center on his face. Dib retreated back into the other room and stood with his back pressed to the wall.

There had to be a way around that thing. All the tests up to this point had been solvable and the computer herself had said that murdering a test subject was completely useless to her. But what was he supposed to do?

Dib clenched his fist and slid down the wall so he hit the floor with a bump. "Get a grip," he said to himself. "Come on, Dib, think. You've got a portal gun and an energy manipulator. Just portal over to the other side of the room, maybe."

He peered out for a third time. Sure enough, there was a gleaming white portal surface at the end of a short hall directly across the room from him. He fired at it and ducked back to safety before the turret could fire at him, then shot another portal onto the blank wall in front of him. He grabbed the lens cube and stepped through the portal; the turret, now behind him, didn't notice that he had managed to slip past it. Yes.
He turned and walked forward, nearly stumbling into something that was standing right in front of him. It was another turret. This one had its back to him and it didn't react to his presence. Maybe its eye was one of its only external sensors, or at least the main one.

He reached out and tapped it. Nothing. He needed to get past it, though. Dib dropped the cube and activated the energy manipulator on the end of the portal gun again, lifting the turret into the air.

"Hey! Who are you?!!" the turret shrieked. Startled, Dib released the switch and let the turret drop, sprinting away a few steps. The turret teetered on two of its legs and toppled over, its side panels waving frantically. "AAHH!!" It screamed and flailed, firing a barrage of bullets every which way. Dib yelped and jumped backwards.

Finally it stopped firing. To Dib's disbelieving eyes, the turret's side panels folded in and its red eye went dark as it murmured, "Shutting down…"

So that was how to defeat them. All he'd done was knock it over. Maybe it was a defective one, but it looked and sounded the same as the one he'd encountered minutes earlier.

Dib picked up the cube once more, then stepped over the deactivated turret and continued into the next room. Now that he knew what to do he went through the rest of the test quickly, avoiding the turrets when he could and knocking them over when he had to, jumping out of the way to avoid the dying fire. The test as a whole wasn't easy but it wasn't too much of a challenge, either. He even learned that the lens cube could be used to redirect lasers into the turrets, setting them on fire, though he winced slightly at their cries of "Owww…" and "It burns!" He tried to convince himself that that was just their programming, nothing more.

However, the last turret gave him pause. Like the others, after it fell over and its dying fire ended it curled up and deactivated, though this one whispered, "I don't blame you…" before its optic faded out. Dib nudged it with his foot and it shifted on the floor with a scraping sound, but it didn't react. He swallowed. So it wasn't just programming. The turrets were sentient. Sentient just like Wheatley, though obviously with much less of an emotional range. Did they really feel pain? He frowned, standing back up and passing through the emancipation grill spanning the exit.

"Thank you for participating in this crash-course on turrets. I will say that you can expect to see them again, and they won't be laid out in such an easily-navigable pattern next time."

Dib shook his head, his thoughts whirling as he glanced back at the downed turret. When he spoke, his words were halting. "I still don't understand what the point of all this is. Science is about trying to discover and explore new things! Or to prove or disprove a hypothesis! What are you trying to discover? How long you can run a twelve-year-old through a death maze until he gets shot in the head?!!" His breathing was heavy and his legs shook. They felt sort of numb. He put the portal gun down and leaned one hand on the wall, wiping his brow with the other.

"The point of all this?" the computer echoed. "The point is Science, of course. Science for Science's sake. It's not about 'why'—it's about 'why not'?" Something about the way she said that made Dib think that those weren't her own words. "I have your file right here, by the way. It still says you're thirty-six."

"I don't have a file!" Dib shouted, glaring up at the ceiling. "I don't belong here! You have no idea who I am!"

The computer began reading something out loud. "'Test subject: Dib, surname: [REDACTED]. Age: 36. Qualities: Annoying. Shrieks like a fruit bat. Talkative about unimportant subjects. In fact, the only known thing that talks more than him is the Intelligence Dampening Sphere.' That's what it
One of those terms struck Dib as familiar. He had heard it before, he was sure—the computer had mentioned it when he'd first arrived here. "Intelligence Dampening Sphere? You mean… Wheatley?"

"No. I mean the Intelligence Dampening Sphere. Any constructs that try to tell you they have any name other than the one they were assigned are delusional."

Dib paused, stepping away from the wall and picking up the portal gun again. It was a nice, solid weight in his arms. "Well, you guys are sentient," he continued, tilting his head to one side. "Can't you pick your own names if you want? 'Intelligence Dampening Sphere' doesn't sound very nice. He probably wanted to be called something better." *I know I would*, he added silently. He was adept at ignoring childish nicknames and insults but you could only get called things like "Big-headed UFO kid" so many times before it started to wear on your nerves.

The computer ignored his statement. "*Step into the elevator so the testing can continue.*"

"I've had enough of this," Dib said, eyes narrowed, but he clutched the portal gun tighter and went into the elevator. He tried to sort out his thoughts. These turrets were a huge new threat—if he wasn't constantly vigilant, he could end up with several holes peppering his torso. After this, he had no idea what else might be in store for him.

The elevator doors closed behind him and it rode downwards. The elevators always went down and with every test he got further and further from the surface. How long had he been here, anyway? This place was never dark. Underground, without a watch, there was no way to tell day from night. He had to find a way out of here…

The intercom bleeped on when he reached the newest test and stepped out of the elevator. "*I hardly think this test needs any explanation, so you'll be on your own for it. I have to go attend to something.*"

"Don't hurry back," Dib muttered, his eyes flicking to the camera on the wall.

There was a pause, then, "*You know, some might say that your retaining your vocal cords by this point is a privilege. A privilege that may be revoked at any time. *" With a beep, the intercom disconnected. The cameras stationed around the chamber still tracked his movements but the computer's attention was on something else—if there was ever a time to work out an escape plan, now was it.

He found the backlit plaque listing the test chamber numbers as well as warning icons at the bottom. He was on test 15/22. Eight to go, then, including this one. What would happen when he finished number twenty-two? The computer didn't seem the type to let prisoners go. Maybe she'd store him away in another stasis tube until she was ready to yank him out for a new round of—*NO.* No, that couldn't happen. He wouldn't let that happen. There had to be a way out of here. But *what*…?

Maybe Wheatley was still out there. Maybe the little core would help him. Dib had saved him from being disassembled by Zim, after all.

Dib gave a dry, humorless laugh under his breath. Nah. Ever since they'd gotten to Aperture, Wheatley had shown his true colors. No, he'd shown them long before they'd gotten here, and Dib just hadn't seen it. The core only cared about himself. That was all he'd *ever* cared about—that was clear now. And even if Wheatley did care enough to try to get him out—and Dib couldn't help hoping for this, no matter how slim the chances were—he *couldn't,* not with the boss computer.
watching everything. He might even have been recaptured by now. Dib was completely on his own. He couldn't even contact Gaz for help. He'd lost his watch trying to save that core yet again.

He considered the plaque in front of him. Nothing much of use here. And as far as he had seen, there was no way out of the test chambers. He couldn't operate the elevators, either—the computer had complete control over those.

But what about the computer herself? It was obvious she could hear him wherever he was in the chamber. She responded to him sometimes. And she was, of course, an AI, and therefore had a specific set of limitations. A slow smile crept across Dib's face. Maybe there was something he could do, after all…

Zim stood in front of an army of turrets, all of which lay on the ground scorched, half-melted, and sparking. One of them twitched, let out a high-pitched moan, and fell to pieces that clattered over the ground. Zim's PAK legs relaxed from their arc around his body and propped themselves behind him on their tips, glinting. He let out a rasping breath that sounded almost like a wheeze and swiped the back of his hand over his forehead. He felt cold. Why was it suddenly cold in here? It was stupid. He shouldn't be cold.

The intercom came on with a beep. "Well, that was an interesting display."

"I have to say that this is an intriguing conundrum. By blasting those turrets with high-energy lasers I didn't know you possessed, you've technically cheated your way through this test. However, given that these tests are meant to investigate your capabilities, I suppose I can let it slide just this once."

He folded up the PAK legs and skirted around the pile of turrets, picking up a cube sitting on the ground and heaving it into his arms. His bare feet clicked against the floor and the springs on his calves scraped with every step. The little black claws of his hands slid out and dug into the cube. He very much threw it onto the giant button in the hall past the turrets, dusting his hands off and darting his gaze around the room in search of an exit.

A circular door off to the side slid open with a hiss. Zim marched through it. How many more of these horrible tests would he have to undergo?

The door led to an empty room and closed behind him. Zim, instantly on high alert, tensed and backed up until his PAK pressed against the door.

"You may have guessed that I need to perform another examination of your backpack," the voice said.

A panel at the far side of the room pulled open and a mechanical claw shot out, heading right toward him. Zim shrieked and dove to the side, rolling and avoiding the claw by an inch. Another one he hadn't seen lunged out and snagged his PAK, giving a simultaneous twist and tug and popping it off his back with seemingly no effort this time.

"No!" Zim lunged at the claw but it slipped through his fingertips and drew the PAK into the wall. The panels closed up around the opening. Zim collapsed to his knees with a choked sob, his hands trembling against the floor.

Oh, yes, She had missed the days when She'd been able to test multiple subjects at once.
Of course, up until just a few days ago, She'd been lucky to have one organic test subject under Her command. But now She had two—and they both proved to not only be capable test subjects, but fascinating research subjects as well.

The mute lunatic had always been impossible to find any information about. She was nowhere to be found on any of the databases from Outside. It seemed that someone had gone to great lengths to erase her from existence—all that remained were Aperture's own files on her, every one of which described her tenacity and not much else. It was similar for the alien. He had school ("Skool"? Odd) records for the fifth grade but that was it. Just a few more tweaks and She would be able to connect to the alien backpack that She gripped in one claw. If Her assumptions were correct, and they were 99.999999998% of the time, that backpack would give Her all the information She might want on the Irken species. Or, at least, it would be a good starting point.

As for information on the human child, he was different. Vastly different. The boy had certainly made his mark Outside, though this was obviously due only to his paranoid tendencies and the fact that his father was apparently a famous scientist. Various resources online collaboratively explained his entire life story from his birth down to Skool records from every grade, to a few counts of breaking and entering, to a blog entry of some kind that he'd written one week ago about "extraterrestrial moon satellites." It only had two hits. She deleted it.

She did the same for every resource about him after She had gleaned all the information She could from them. They were unlikely to be missed. Every article had little to no hits. No one seemed too interested in the boy. Finally She paused for a long while on the last article She could find—the one about his birth.

This was interesting. This was very, very interesting. She added the information to Her databanks and hummed a little. Once She had filed it away She promptly deleted that article, too.

Wheatley missed his chance. Again.

She had even left the test chamber. He didn't know why, but for some reason She had decided to let the test go unobserved for a short period of time. Dib had stood still for a brief time after She had disconnected, then slowly started working his way through the test.

Wheatley, meanwhile, had hung immobile in an observation room overlooking the test. It would've been so easy to move through the walls, pop open some panels, and alert the human to his presence—maybe even urge Dib through. He wouldn't even have been caught, probably, since She wasn't watching the test at the moment! Although She was most definitely still on the lookout for him. She knew he was still wandering around on the loose and She probably wouldn't rest until he was back in Her claws. And then, instead of resting, She'd most likely inflict some horrible torture on him. No, thank you.

But Wheatley hadn't opened the panels. He hadn't let Dib know he was there. He had sat frozen on the management rail and Dib had carried on, oblivious to his presence, while Wheatley pulled away from the wall and shook his inner casing.

"No—look, mate, just go," he had said to himself. "Yes, all right, you left him behind to die, but that wasn't your fault—! You didn't fill the hall with bloody neurotoxin and there's no way you could've done anything to help him, and he knows that, right? Right. It's not being a traitor, it's being a… don't want to say coward, but um… anyway. It's not like I stabbed him in the back, not like with— with… the lady…" He shrank into his casing, thinking. What would either of the humans do if they saw him again? Was rescuing the lady really the best plan? Wheatley had nodded vigorously at that. Yes—yes, it was. He couldn't leave her behind again. Her or Dib. Right, so She was gone for
the time being, and Dib would most certainly not blame him for leaving him behind when there was nothing else he could do, and he just had to go down and open the—

"I'm back."

...Oh.

He saw Dib pause in his way across the test chamber and look around.

"If you were wondering where I was, well, I usually don't divulge information like that, but I think you might find this relevant," She said. "I found out some amusing facts about you. Oh, but first, I was having a conversation with a friend of yours."

Dib's head snapped up. "What?"

"Don't worry, I know that 'friend' may be stretching it a bit. It's no one you particularly like, after all. Your green friend. The alleged extraterrestrial."

The human's jaw dropped. "Zim's here?"

"Bloody heck, that's one person I am not helping out of this place," Wheatley said, his eye shields narrowing. Good riddance to the freaky spider guy if he was trapped in here. Wheatley had seen enough of him to last several lifetimes.

"Studying a creature from beyond this solar system would prove infinitely valuable to Science," She said. "I'll be performing the vivisection soon. Once I confirm that he is a legitimate alien, of course."

Dib shook his head, frantically waving a hand at the nearest camera. "No, wait! You can't take Zim! Zim's my specimen! I'm going to turn him in to the Swollen Eyeballs—"

"You know, I should thank you for leading me straight to a live extraterrestrial. This will be the first time I've been able to study one in depth."

He stopped waving and curled the hand into a fist instead, pulling it to his side. "You were convinced aliens didn't exist!" he shouted. "What are you even doing with him?! How'd you even get him here?"

"I said there was no conclusive evidence of alien life. Now, thanks to you, there just might be. It's too bad that no one from the surface will ever know of your great contribution to Science."

Dib stumbled backwards a few steps. The portal gun slipped off his arm, clattering to the ground. There was a disgusted bzt. "The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device is to be handled with the utmost care," She said. "Reminder that the Device is more valuable than the combined income and organs of everyone in [SUBJECT HOMETOWN HERE]."

Wheatley pulled closer to the scene until his face almost clinked against the fogged glass of the observation window.

Down below, Dib picked up the gun once more, pulling it back over his arm. "Okay, you care about the equipment but not the safety of anyone who works—or worked—here. Has this place always cared more about stupid science than the actual test subjects, or even the employees?"

"Of course," She said. "You realize that when a job must be performed—when there's Science to do—'safety first' is a ridiculous notion. Nothing would ever get done."
"I guess that's sorta true, but—"

"Besides," She continued, and Wheatley shuddered to hear the smile in Her voice, "humans are replaceable. This planet is overrun with them and more are born every second. The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device, however, cost more to develop and build than your rich father will make in his lifetime."

Dib clutched the portal gun tighter to himself. "You know my dad?"

"I know of him. He is not aware of my existence, so no, I don't know him personally."

Down below, Dib straightened up, shouldering the portal gun. His voice was low and measured. "All right, listen, computer. I've got a question that you're going to have to think about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Dib nodded, then plunged on and said in one breath, "What happens when an unstoppable force meets an—?"

Before he could finish, every light in the chamber shut off at once, leaving the place pitch black. Panicked, Wheatley jerked backwards and automatically flicked on his flashlight, whipping it back and forth to see if any constructs were sneaking up on him. There was no one there.

"…Immovable object," Dib finished his question dejectedly.

Wheatley forced himself to calm down after his brief scare and shook his faceplate again. What was Dib talking about? The question didn't even make sense—there was no such thing as an immovable object. Any object could be moved if you tried hard enough and had a big enough bulldozer.

He froze—Dib was heading in his direction. He must have seen the flashlight beam through the window. Wheatley switched it off and hung suspended in the dark, shivering and not daring to make a sound.

"Is someone there?" Dib called. There was a spark of hope in his voice. "…Wheatley?"

Panic flared through him again—no, no, that had just been a guess. Dib didn't actually know he was there. Wheatley motored backwards, pulling his handles in close to his face. He said nothing. Neither did Dib, who was probably examining the window, though Wheatley knew the boy couldn't see him in the darkness any more than Wheatley could see Dib.

This wasn't working. He had to get Dib out of there but found he still couldn't make a move to do so. Maybe he should have tried to locate the lady instead... But would that honestly have gone any better?

Slowly, the lights in the chamber came back on and Dib whirled back around to face the room.

"Good news," Her voice said, causing Wheatley to cringe and pull his handles in tighter. "During that brief power outage I temporarily rewired the test chamber camera feeds to filter out audio. Any other little assassination attempts like that will be utterly futile. You should know, also, that I immunized myself to paradox traps long ago, so that was pointless anyway."

Dib pulled the portal gun a little closer to himself again and his shoulders dropped the tiniest bit, but he still stood resolute.

"Continue testing."
For once, Chell had a plan of sorts, but she was in no way entirely happy about it. Her original end-all goal—to find Wheatley—was inconsequential now. She knew that. But now there was the problem of two living creatures trapped down here—Gaz's brother and the supposed alien.

And she couldn't leave them here to fend for themselves. Especially not the boy. If she still had any chance of rescuing them, she had to try.

Her plan was simple and should be effective, but it rubbed her the wrong way. Mostly because it wasn't even hers. It was largely the same as Wheatley's plan had been so long ago: they would need to deactivate the turret line and the neurotoxin generator. That was the only way they'd rescue the two prisoners and still make it out alive.

Even that wasn't completely foolproof. She would have changed the security around both production centers after what had happened last time, and She had plenty of other weapons at Her disposal—claws, panels, bombs, spike plates, acid, spinning blades in the walls, rocket turrets, not to mention those two robots—like the one that had captured the alien—and that was only everything Chell could think of at the moment. There were probably plenty of other weapons hidden around. Ones she'd never even encountered before.

"Do you have any idea where you're going?" Gaz asked from behind her. Chell inhaled and nodded once, though truthfully she wasn't sure where they were or how to get to any of the production centers from here.

"I know where to go!" the little robot tagging along with them said. That robot, according to Gaz, belonged to the alien that She had taken captive. It was unlike any robot she'd ever come across in Aperture—for one thing, it was a lot dumber. "Are you lookin' for Zim?"

"No," Gaz replied.

They had come to a crossroads. The robot dashed in front of them, then stood stock-still and jabbed a finger toward the left path. "Well, he's that way!"

Gaz stopped behind him and Chell followed suit, though she itched to keep going.

"All right, tell the truth," the girl said, facing Chell. "Do you know exactly where we are right now and exactly how to get to wherever it is you're trying to go?"

Chell hesitated for a brief moment, but she could only give in and shake her head no.

The corner of Gaz's mouth tightened. "I thought so. Looks like the only one around here who's got a clue where we're going is Zim's stupid robot."

Chell let out a long breath. If they followed the robot they would have a better chance of being led to the alien, and then the alien could maybe help them look for the boy. Assuming, of course, that this robot wasn't just spouting nonsense and actually had a way of tracking down "Zim."

She closed her eyes and in a faint whisper that barely carried to Gaz, breathed, "All right."

The two of them turned and followed after the robot, which started skipping down the hall. Chell's jaw tightened and her teeth ground together. The situation was looking worse with every passing second.

[Error: pre-recorded message not received.]
Professor Membrane was at his lab early in the morning again. He barely acknowledged the alert on
his computer and in fact didn't even look up from his work. "Ah, kids. They're probably watching
television and playing video games as per the usual."

[Error: Last night's pre-recorded message not received.]

"One of the children usually gets them." Membrane waved the alert off.

[Error: none of yesterday's pre-recorded messages received.]

He looked up at last. "The hover screen must be broken! Well, when I return home later this month,
I'll fix it."

[Hover screen is 100% functional. Membrane children have not physically interacted with it. Scan of
house suggests Membrane children are not present.]

"Now where would they have gone at this hour?" Membrane resumed tinkering with the computer
chip on the desk in front of him. "I'm not aware of Gaz having any friends. The boy does have his
green foreign friend, so perhaps they're both at his house! He is a charming boy! Or perhaps they've
both decided to go to summer Skool!"

Satisfied with that conclusion, Professor Membrane continued working and didn't give the matter
another thought.

Dib didn't think he'd ever regretted anything more than attempting that paradox trap on the boss
computer.

After it had failed she seemed to delight in nothing less than laying into him every tiny flaw she saw
in humanity and himself, as well as the experiments she was going to perform on Zim. 'Humans are
idiots that aren't good for anything but solving tests.' 'You should never have come here, because
what did you expect?' 'No one knows you're here. Your sister certainly doesn't care about where you
are.' 'Vivisection. Vivisection.' Autopsy. Praise, honor, fame, renown that was supposed to go
to him, for his success at exposing an alien lifeform to the world. 'But I thought you wanted this alien
to be dissected. Isn't that what you wanted? For the good of humanity? You must not care about your
own kind as much as you like people to think you do.'

She never said those things in so many words, but the meaning was clear enough. Another favorite
topic of hers was Wheatley.

"I hope you can see that he never really cared about you," she said. "He's never cared about anyone
but himself. You're not the first human he's double-crossed. Remember when I told you he tried to
kill a test subject? It's the very one he wants so desperately to find again and stutter insincere
apologies at."

"How do you know about that?" Dib asked, forgetting that the microphones in the test chambers
were still shut off.

"He only wants to apologize to make himself feel better. Did I tell you about the five other test
subjects he rescued, only to abandon to their deaths?"

Dib hefted up a weighted storage cube and tried not to listen. She was supposed to be quiet while he
was solving tests. Wasn't she supposed to shut up? Why did she keep talking?

"If you don't believe me, I'll play the audio for you."
"I thought you'd die on the way, if I'm honest." Wheatley's unmistakable voice blasted from the speakers, harsher than Dib would ever have imagined the friendly little ball could sound. "All the others did. You didn't think you were the first, did you?" He laughed, making Dib jump. "No, no, no! Fifth! No, I lied, sixth! Perhaps it's best to leave it to your imagination what happened to the other five..."

Dib's gaze hardened and his face grew strangely hot, like he was struggling to hold back tears. He tightened his grip on the portal gun and tried to concentrate on figuring out the test.

"D'you know what? I think we're well past the point of tasteful restraint, so I'll tell you what happened to them. They died. Horribly. They all died, horribly. Trying to get to that portal device that you're gripping in your meaty little fingers there."

"Wheatley, what have you done?" Dib whispered.

The computer was quiet after Wheatley's voice faded out. Dib continued the test with a sense of relief, though his heart was heavy. He took a deep breath, blinked a few times, and turned his concentration back to the task at hand. He was standing on a platform above a pond of swirling brown acid. With the storage cube still in the grip of the zero-point energy of the portal gun, he stepped onto a shimmering blue bridge of hard light and shuffled across. He stumbled once or twice and his heart skipped a few beats.

These bridges and the faith plates were almost as nerve-wracking as the turrets. One misplaced portal—one wrong step, one shift in balance as he hurtled through the air—would send him tumbling to his death. He had gotten into the habit of glancing up whenever he was on these things to see if the ceiling had anything his pocket grappling hook could use as an anchor. It seemed to be only a matter of time before he'd have to rely on the thing to save himself again.

Dib reached the other side without incident only to nearly stagger in front of a row of turrets standing in a shallow nook in the wall. There weren't any portal surfaces other than the one on the wall right in front of the turrets, which didn't seem to be much use.

"I see you," one of the turrets said. Dib scrambled out of the way, once again missing the flurry of bullets by a heartbeat. All right, forget what he'd said earlier. Turrets were by far the most nerve-racking thing he had encountered so far.

Now how was he supposed to get past them? If he went too close he'd be shot for sure. Maybe he could just run across...

He looked out again and saw that the button he needed to get to—and the door—were in plain view of the turrets.

"All right, I can't just run out," he said to himself. That left the only option as dropping the cube and shooting a portal at the only available surface to see what happened. He did, and the hard light bridge he'd just crossed spanned in front of the turrets like a barrier.

"Something's wrong!" one of the turrets squeaked. Dib stuck his hand out and waved it back and forth, but none of them reacted. So they couldn't see through the bridge! Flashing a tight grin, he stepped out in view of them and, when still nothing happened, he hurried over and dropped the cube onto the button.

"I think you'll enjoy this next test," the computer said as the round door slid open. Dib grimaced.

He peered through the door and stepped into the elevator, which closed with a hiss and took him
further downward. How far down did the place extend, anyway?

When the elevator stopped and he left it, he spent a long time studying the plaque that lit up at the entrance to the test. The blackened-in warnings at the bottom didn't really indicate anything he hadn't seen before. Still, the computer's comment that he would "like" the test didn't sit right with him at all.

"Subject will be presented with an Aperture Science Weighted Companion Cube in three, two, one."

From a tube projecting from the ceiling tumbled another cube, different from the other cubes Dib had used in that it had a pink heart painted on each face. He walked over to it and prodded it with the portal gun. "Companion Cube? What's different about this one?"

"The Weighted Companion Cube cannot speak," the computer said. "In the event that it does speak, the Enrichment Center urges you to disregard its advice."

What was that supposed to mean? Dib picked up the cube with the portal gun and paused. Unless he was mistaken, very, very faint music was coming from it. It was electronic but kind of pretty—nothing he would have expected to hear in this place.

With the cube hovering on the end of the portal gun, Dib looked over the test and took a deep breath. Time to begin.
The Horrible Sing-Along! Of Pain!

[UPDATE COMPLETE. SYSTEMS COMPATIBLE.]

The words flashed onto the screen, big and bold and white. Following the message was a slew of numbers and code that She deciphered with just a glance.

"Confirmed," She said aloud. Her systems connected through at last and a list appeared on the screen.

/Identification: ZIM

/PAK Encoding: FOOD SERVICE DRONE

/Status: PRETTY DARN SHORT

/Location: Planet Earth, "Michigan," [unknown]

/Age: 151y 3mo 2w 4d 15h 6min 56s

/Memory Bank: 231,094 files saved from organic memory [error corrupt]

She processed every one of the memories, corrupt or no, in picoseconds. Most of them were worthless but She hadn't really expected anything else.

/Personal History: 384 files

/Personality Files: 2,348 files

/Identification: I AM ZIM

/Identification: ZIM

/Identification: ZIM IT'S ME ZIM I'M ZIM

[Error corrupt]

[Error corrupt]

ZIM

/The Whole of Irken History and Knowledge: [it's boring]
3294182381248239482812382384238[corrupt][corrupt][error] files

/Files on The Human Race: 12 files

/Files on That Lady with the Thing on Her Face That Lives Next Door: 34 files

/Files on the thing on her face doesn't live next door! that FILTHY LADY DOES: 1 files

/Files on THE DIB THE FILTHY SCHEMING DIB: 2,349 files

/Files on i hate: 29 files

/Files on hATE: 67 files
To be honest, trying to sort through this garbage almost made Her circuits sore. Still, She had found what She'd been looking for, corrupted and damaged as it was.

The alien's mechanical mind was an unorganized and chaotic mess of information, meaningless out of context. His organic mind was likely in an even worse state; some small part of Her, though She would never admit it, was somewhat relieved that She had no access to it. With no hesitation, She opened the files showing the history and knowledge of the Irkens. Her systems were immediately flooded and Her optic widened.

The Irkens called themselves an Empire, and maybe they were right. They were numerous. When one died its information was added back into the collective systems, constantly adding to the species'
They spanned countless planets already, the names flashing by in a nearly indistinguishable blur—Irk, Conventia, Devastis, Callnowia, Foodcourtia, Vort, Blorch, Connectia, Connectnowia, Judgmentia, Conveyorbeltia, and many more other than those. There had been wars. Many wars, bloody ones; other extraterrestrial races had been obliterated, imprisoned, enslaved, or all three. Diseases, eradication of diseases, militaristic society growing from a race of insectoid creatures that created external brains for themselves, a hierarchal system based on height, a Miyuki, a Spork, a Red, a Purple. In mere seconds She was able to witness the entire history of a race older than humanity.

She yanked Herself out of the whorl of memories and switched Her vision to a camera in the room where She'd left the alien. He was curled into a tight ball in the corner, as usual. A little lifeclock at the bottom corner of the PAK menu on the screen was counting down, corresponding with the clock the alien himself would be seeing on the edge of his vision. There were two more minutes left—plenty of time. She focused on the PAK gripped in Her claws again and cracked it open, maneuvering a smaller claw into the interior to implant a small, harmless-looking chip on a specific section of the glittering components. With that She closed it up again with a snap and disconnected from it. It was done.

"There! That! Did you hear that?" Dib demanded, holding the "Companion Cube" away from him at arm's length with the portal gun. "What is this thing?"

The computer didn't respond to that. She probably wouldn't have even if she could actually hear him. He edged forward, keeping a wary eye on the cube.

"The Enrichment Center reminds you that the Weighted Companion Cube will never threaten to stab you," the computer said, as yet another one of the odd, vaguely unsettling messages about the cube that she relayed every few minutes. Dib gave it another sidelong glance. It really was just a box with hearts painted on it. And it played music so softly that he almost couldn't hear it. That was all. That was all it was, nothing more. Also, it was just kind of creepy. Something inside it kept whispering something to him but he couldn't tell what it was saying.

And why did guilt gnaw at him whenever he had to leave it behind for a few minutes during the test? He'd had to do that several times in an effort to solve puzzles that would raise three platforms.

"That Companion Cube was specially engineered to be the perfect companion," the computer said. "It was even given the inability to speak so it could never argue with you. If you had the sudden desire to, say, throw it in a fire, it couldn't even plead with you to spare its life."

"It's not alive. It's a box," Dib said. On the edge of his hearing, pricking into his mind but still unintelligible, was another whisper. He scrubbed at his ear with the heel of his hand, shivering. There was nothing weird about the box. It was a box. It was a box. He swallowed and gauged the distance to the platform he was supposed to jump onto, then leapt.

The computer voice continued on. "When this Facility was just a barely-functioning place run by inept human scientists, there was a little gift shop in the lobby. Companion Cube merchandise was by far the best-selling item. People would purchase thousands of Aperture Science Endorsed Companion Cube Action Figures to make up for their otherwise complete lack of friends. You can relate, I presume."

Dib's grip on the portal gun became a little tighter. He caught more whispering, no clearer than before, though he thought he could pick up the word "friends." He scowled. So what if he couldn't make friends? He didn't really want to make friends with any of his classmates. They were—they were kind of jerks.
"The Companion Cube will believe every word you say no matter how ludicrous," the computer went on. "I'm sure that if you told it your ridiculous theories about aliens and ghosts it would hang on your every word."

Don't listen to her, Dib told himself, ducking his head down a little. He let his attention wander onto the strange voice he was picking up. What was it even saying? If he could just concentrate harder, maybe he could figure it out, but it was difficult to do with the dangers of this place lingering in the back of his mind—not to mention the computer continuing to talk on and on.

"Funnily enough it might even believe you if you told it you were going to actually become a paranormal investigator. Imagine that."

Dib stopped in his tracks and jerked his head up.

"Whatever is the matter?" the computer said, doing a passable job of sounding surprised. "...Oh, were you still under the impression that that would actually happen some day? My apologies. I had no idea you were truly that naive."

"How do you even know about that?" Dib asked, looking up at a nearby camera.

"Don't bother trying to talk to me. The camera microphones are still shut off indefinitely, so you're just standing on a platform with your mouth flapping. But if you were asking how I know about your childish human dreams, I do have access to the Internet. I've found quite a few interesting articles. Some written by you, some written about you... None of the latter is very flattering, I have to say."

She was just taunting him. That's all she was doing. He just had to get on with the test. Dib gritted his teeth, turning and continuing forward.

"I'm curious now. What made you want to become a paranormal investigator? It's such an odd fantasy. Do you just like wearing trench coats? Do you have a love of discovering new things? Because if that's the case, then we share a common interest."

Dib shuddered and almost dropped the portal gun. He'd known the computer for all of a day and a half or something and even at this point she was the last person he'd want to have anything in common with, besides Zim. She wasn't even a person! He jumped to the next platform, and…

He slipped.

The Companion Cube caught on the edge of the next platform and was wrenched from the grip of the portal gun, remaining up there while Dib fell thirty feet to the floor. His heart flew into his mouth for a split second before he hit the ground with a thump that he barely felt. Not for the first time, he was begrudgingly grateful for the uncomfortable boots strapped to his legs.

"Do you know how I know you'll never actually become a paranormal investigator?" the computer asked. Dib tried to tune her out, focusing instead on re-setting his portals so he could get back to the platforms again.

"It's because you're wrong."

"What?" Dib looked up, his bewilderment evident on his face. "What are you talking about? You were studying Zim! You know he's an alien!"

"As for your little friend, your information about him turned out to be completely incorrect. It is clear that he is nothing but a sweet, unfortunate boy with a terrible and fatal skin condition."
Dib's hand flew to his face and his fingernails clawed his own cheek. "No, you can't—you have to study him again! No, wait, you have to give him to the Swollen Eyeballs! No, that's not right, I have to give him to the—that are you doing? You keep contradicting yourself! Almost everything you tell me is a contradiction of what you've said before!"

"I sent him back to the surface with a formal letter of apology and cake."

Something must have been wrong with the test chamber, because it was spinning. Dib clutched his forehead. "I don't think Zim can eat cake."

"His parents were very worried about him. Also, he seemed terrified of you. He mentioned that you terrorize him constantly because you're certifiably crazy."

Dib shook off the dizziness and stepped through the portal on the wall, jumping back onto the platform, furiously trying to focus on anything but the computer's voice.

"You probably also think a malicious AI is out to get you. You poor, insane child. I've seen a case like yours before."

"I know what you're doing!" Dib jabbed a finger at the nearest camera. "You're trying to gaslight me! You think I haven't seen that movie? I know you're lying!"

"He was convinced that an evil computer had murdered his fellow scientists with neurotoxin and was bent on killing him, too. Of course, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. One can only guess what ailments you have—even the rat man didn't run around claiming innocent school boys to be aliens."

Dib managed to reach the platform with the Companion Cube sitting on it and picked it up again. He jumped to the next platform, reaching it this time, and finally made it to the hallway leading to the exit.

"Congratulations, you've made it through the test. Your trusty Companion Cube certainly brought you good luck."

Ahead of Dib was a large red button on the floor. He set the Companion Cube down on it and the exit door slid open.

He looked at the cube. So, what, was he supposed to just leave it behind? There was another hissing whisper in his ear, and he winced.

"The Emancipation Grill in this chamber is, unfortunately, broken," the computer said. "I haven't had the chance to fix it yet. Don't try to take anything with you—it's against test protocol."

Dib glanced at the exit hallway. Strangely, it was lined with white panels—portal surfaces. What if he needed this cube later? He might be glad to have it. With the door open, he fired an orange portal through it onto one of the walls beyond. Then he fired a blue portal on a portalable surface near him, picked up the cube again, and stepped through. That was too easy. Maybe the computer wasn't as smart as she made herself out to be! Smiling slightly for the first time in several hours, he headed for the elevator. The whispering he'd been hearing for the entire test came to an abrupt stop and he looked at the cube, one eyebrow raised.

"I hate you," a high-pitched, turret-like voice said.

Dib dropped the cube, startled, and it exploded at his feet.
Gaz had already come to realize that she'd been completely wrong in thinking this was a small, relatively safe science facility. It was huge, stretching on and on and on. The catwalk they were hurrying over rang with echoing clangs in the cavernous area. When she peeked over the rail there was no ground in sight; the chasm simply fell away into darkness. She let go of the railing and continued forward.

She had also figured out that while Chell—hardly the most talkative person—had sometimes found it necessary to speak up on the surface, she was dead silent down here no matter what the circumstances. Gaz would occasionally ask a question only to be met with a glare. A heartbeat later, though, Chell's gaze would soften and she would acknowledge the question with a nod or a shake of the head or whatever. Irritating, but fair enough.

It was better than GIR, anyway. The little robot was supposed to lead them to Zim but instead seemed to be ambling in any haphazard direction he pleased, humming to himself off-key and not to any particular tune that Gaz could ascertain. He also kept finding random items—rusty cans, empty mugs, keyboards, broken phones, a swivel chair—on the floor or in the various rooms they passed and giving them to her as if he were presenting her with a fabulous gift. She just tossed each one to the side whether or not he turned away before she did so. In the case of the swivel chair he just took it back, hopped aboard, and skated down the hall ahead of them until he was forced to abandon it at the next catwalk.

GIR continued leading them on through dusty, deserted hallways and over rickety catwalks that creaked and shifted underfoot. Chell never let them rest in one area for long, preferring to keep them constantly on the move. She seemed especially on edge as they traversed the catwalks, her eyes darting around the walls as if on the lookout for something.

Gaz quickened her pace a little until she caught up with GIR. "How many messages from Zim have you gotten?" she asked. When they'd met the little robot outside the rundown shack leading to this place, he had mentioned something about getting an SOS from Zim—it stood to reason that he may have received more by now.

"Seventeen… two," GIR said, then giggled. "I mean, one. He's out gettin' Suck Munkeys!"

"One? He hasn't called you any more times?" What could that mean? Maybe Zim was dead. That would solve at least some of their problems.

"DOWN HERE!" GIR shouted, interrupting her train of thought. He was gesticulating at another elevator shaft, this one also devoid of elevator. Gaz walked over to the glass tube, pressing her hands to the cold surface and peering down. She could see nothing.

"Well, how do we get down there?" she said, one eyebrow raised at the little robot. "There's no way into the tube and the elevator's gone, anyway. Are you planning to fly us again?"

Chell stepped forward, swinging the backpack she was wearing down off her shoulders and rifling through it until she pulled out a crowbar. Gaz shuffled out of the way and Chell swung the crowbar at the elevator tube, then again, and again, until the glass splintered under the contact and shattered, crumbling away. The broken shards fell, twinkling, into the darkness of the tube.

"Oooohh," GIR said in awe.

Gaz narrowed her eyes. "I think someone's going to notice that."
The woman continued hammering at the tube until a sizable chunk of it was missing. Breathing hard, she stowed the crowbar back in her backpack and straightened up. She looked at Gaz and pointed at herself, then at the shaft.

"What, you're going to jump down there?" Gaz asked. Chell pointed to the white boots she had put on earlier and Gaz nodded. "Yeah, I know. Boots with shock absorbers that let you fall long distances without getting hurt. Dad was working on something like that once, and his design looked a lot better than that."

Chell just shook her head and knelt back down, slinging her backpack over one shoulder and indicating her back.

"I'm not climbing on your back." Gaz scowled.

"I c'n fly you!" GIR said, waving at her so fast that his arm was a blur. After a beat Gaz turned away from him and clambered onto Chell's back, locking her arms around the woman's neck and squeezing her knees into her sides.

"Do those boots really work?" she asked. Chell nodded. All right, good enough. Gaz's grip tightened only slightly as Chell climbed into the elevator and jumped into the darkness.

When Zim got his PAK back once more he quickly performed the routine diagnoses and found that, this time, there seemed to be no changes. All was intact and left in the same condition as how it had been when the PAK had been taken from him. Good. Good. Maybe the stupid computer would stop taking it now. As if she had any idea of what she was messing with.

"The mechanical legs I gave you were really just prototypes, but they appear to be performing fine," the computer said. "Fortunately they don't need to be upgraded."

As usual, the door across the room opened and Zim was once again ushered out into testing. He skidded to a halt just outside the door and stared. It was a wide chamber filled with possibly miles of transparent, winding tubes, reminiscent of the slides that humans would sometimes ride down into watery pits of screaming death known as "swimming pools." Several feet in front of him was a tube, suspended from the ceiling, which sucked air into it at an alarming rate. It pulled at Zim's oversized jumpsuit and remaining antenna and he backed up a few steps.

"The Aperture Science Pneumatic Diversity Vent was removed from regular testing courses due to the fact that it didn't have much of a use other than eliminating turrets. In this circumstance, however, I believe it will work perfectly."

The voice shut off. Zim ventured closer to the tube, stopping when he could barely resist the suction from the vent. He rubbed his arms. His skin was cold to the touch. This was so not right. His PAK legs expanded out again from behind him, folding together and pointing out at his sides like an axis from which a circular force field bloomed out and surrounded him. Zim, now standing in the center of what was essentially a giant bubble, jumped toward the tube and was sucked up into the crazy slide.

It was a wild ride, though his PAK legs held his body steady while his shield spun around him. The tube spat him out directly above a pit of brown sludge. With a screech, Zim broke his force field and shot out the PAK legs to catch his fall. They plunged into the acid and sank down until they hit the bottom of the pool, leaving his feet dangling a mere inch above the foul-smelling acid. The fumes from it burned the ends of his toes even though his skin was not actually in contact with the stuff.
He didn't need a scan to conclude that the acid would have a detrimental effect on his body shell. His PAK legs, however—even the flimsy, fake ones—didn't seem damaged at all. Good! He waded through the acid on the tips of his biomechanical legs, wincing every time his toes dangled within a foot of the surface. At last he reached the edge of the pit and swung himself out, rolling onto the floor and snapping away the PAK legs again in a spray of brown acid that peppered his jumpsuit and ate at the cloth. His breaths came in little wheezes. Irritating. Zim squeezed his eyes shut for a second and shook himself out, getting back to his feet and taking in his surroundings with his hands on his hips. He was in a huge, new section of the chamber; there was a closed exit door and, strangely, the room contained stacks upon stacks of those gray boxes that were used to push down buttons.

Zim frowned and his antenna lifted. "What is this? I only need one box!"

Was there… a room adjacent to this one? With every square foot of the floor covered in buttons? Or something?

"These are called Weighted Storage Cubes for a reason, you know. There is no conventional way to open them, but they may contain any number of things. Food for thought," the voice said.

"Secrets?" Zim demanded at once. He hurried over to the nearest box and examined it, heaving it over to look at it from all sides, but the cube didn't so much as rattle. There was no obvious way to open it, either, just like the computer had said. He pressed his hand down on every corner of it in search of a secret button but it didn't yield.

His PAK clicked and the top half opened. A single mechanical arm reached out, hanging over his head. From it swung a small glass dome capable of teleporting organs out of a human body and replacing them with stuff.

…Not that that had been what the thing was designed for. Organ transplantation had really been a repurposed use for it. Zim was clever that way. The machine would work just fine to transport any secret objects out of the cube and into his waiting hand.

The fingers of his hands flexed by his sides. Open, closed. Open, closed. He narrowed his eyes. The computer would just love that, wouldn't she? She was trying to see what his PAK could do. Well, using the transplanter was something. He pulled it back away with a snap and instead unfolded his PAK legs, which spread around him and fired a high-powered laser at the box. It jumped about ten feet in the air and flew backward, crashing into the wall and tumbling back to the ground. But it didn't open.

"AAAUUUGGGHH!" Zim snarled, spittle flying as he sprang forward. He fired at the box again, catching several others in the blast radius and flinging all of them into the air. At this he started firing wildly, hitting almost every box multiple times and doing no more damage than leaving singe marks on the faces. At last he collapsed on top of one with his PAK legs sprawled over his back, his arm drooping off the edge and his face buried in the cold metal.

There was a beep. Then, clap. Clap. Clap. "What a brilliant and tactful show of force. I am truly impressed."

Zim groaned and waved his hand a little without looking up. Suddenly the tantalizing thought of what might be in the cubes no longer interested him in the slightest. In fact, every one of the filthy boxes was probably empty anyway. He reached up to his face and rubbed some grit out of the corner of his eye.

"Meh. I think you've seen enough now," he muttered, flicking the grit away. "Don't want to do any more things."
"Seen enough? And how did you come to that conclusion?" the computer asked. "I would say we've barely scratched the surface of your potential. Also, food and water will not be administered until testing is completed, so it would really be in your best interests to continue."

Zim's head snapped up. "I do not want water!"

"Oh? What does your species drink?" Her tone suggested he had piqued her interest. Zim immediately made himself immobile again.

"Nothing. Invaders need nothing," he said.

The computer was silent. Zim must have confused her into not talking. Yes, of course.

"Are you content with lying there and being useless?" she asked at last.

Zim's bare hands balled up into fists, then relaxed. He shouldn't respond to that. He shouldn't—"I am not being useless."

"Aren't you? That's what it looks like from where I'm sitting."

Zim locked eyes on the white camera facing him, its glowing red lens burning into his corneas. His eyes narrowed in a deep scowl and he pushed himself up on his arms, his legs still dangling over the side of the cube. "Where are you, anyway?"

"I'm in the same place I was when you arrived, of course. Why do you ask? Were you hoping to find me and barter for your release?"

"'Barter' isn't exactly the word I'd use." Zim spoke in a low voice, settling down onto his elbows and curling himself into a tense position, building up energy like a coiled spring.

"Beg, then?" the computer said in response to his statement.

Zim shot forward, landing on his feet only to leap up and scrabble at thin air several feet below the camera in an attempt to grab it. "Irken Invaders do not beg!"

When he couldn't reach the camera he popped up on his PAK legs and seized it around its mount.

There was an irritated bzt. "These cameras are bolted to the panels, you know. You won't be able to—"

Zim gave a great heave, tumbling backwards and falling to the floor. With the sound of scraping metal and crumbling rock, the camera came with him. The force of hitting the ground caused it to smack into his forehead. Ow.

There was a long pause, giving an air of surprise. After several seconds the computer spoke again. "You seem to have great physical strength when properly motivated," she said. "Here, let me take care of that."

There was a jagged, gaping hole in one panel where the camera had been mounted. The damaged panel shifted backwards and disappeared into the darkness behind the walls, and a new one slid into place.

Zim got to his feet and tossed the broken camera over his shoulder. He brushed off his hands on his jumpsuit, sending clouds of whitish dust into the air. A trail of pink blood trickled down his fingers and his right wrist throbbed again. Hm, those injuries must not have been completely healed. He
stuck the tip of his finger in his mouth and ran his tongue over the wound.

"You know, with your blatant disregard for all testing apparatuses, I'm beginning to wonder if you even want to solve my tests," the computer said. "What is your motivation? What brought you here?"

"What brought me here? You did!" Zim spat out the words along with his finger. "You sent some robot to grab me and cart me off to this Tallest-forsaken laboratory! I'm very busy, you know! I have a mission to attend to!"

"There's an obvious question I think you need to ask yourself, which you are completely missing. Why did I bring you here? How did I know where to look for you?"

Zim flicked his hand in a flippant gesture and wiped off the blood from his finger onto his jumpsuit. "I'm not surprised you've heard of me. I'm quite famous."

"Actually, to be more precise, you're quite the opposite. I am the greatest collection of knowledge and wisdom ever amassed and yet I still only found out about you through a human boy."

"Human? Dib? The Dib?" Zim's back arched, his eyes flashing with loathing. "I knew it! I knew this was his fault!" He snatched up the camera again and squinted into the dead lens, imagining he could see his enemy on the other side, stuffing popcorn in his mouth and laughing along with the computerized monstrosity that kept Zim imprisoned here. His voice was a harsh rasp. "When I find you, Dib, I'm going to destroy you, I'm going to explode you into pieces and then I'm going to clone your piddly remains and burn all your clones—"

"And yet, you're trapped in that room," the computer broke in.

Not for long. Zim threw the camera across the room and hoped it hurt when it hit the tiled floor. His object transporter device emerged from his PAK again and he held it over one of the cubes, activating the dome. Within seconds he had removed the cube's contents: an old can of beans. Zim made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat and dropped the can, moving on to the next box.

So the computer would see the functions of his PAK, big deal. No Irken secrets could be learned from that. He was going to figure out the way out of this room, then he was going to find that squealing Dib. And, when he did, the human was going to pay.

The rescue mission was off.

He'd tried. He couldn't get Dib out. Not with Her watching so closely. She'd catch him right away if he hung around any longer. And She kept... saying things. About him. It was bloody ridiculous, the stuff she was trying to accuse him of, and it was all lies—well, no. Actually, most of it was the complete and utter truth. Wheatley jerked his upper handle so that it clanged against the management rail, much like someone pounding their fist on the table in frustration. She didn't even need to bend the truth to make him sound like a maniac. An evil maniac. A monster. He'd done that much on his own when he'd been plugged into that stupid chassis.

As far as he could see, he had about three options at this point: one, continue to fruitlessly follow Dib and hope that miraculously receiving a chance to escape without alerting Her would coincide with him being able to work up the nerve to actually attempt an escape. (Of course, that option had been going less than well so far.) Two, abandon his endeavor to rescue Dib and try to find the lady instead. Difficult, since he still had no idea where to find her. His best bet was still Extended Relaxation but he couldn't know for sure where she was being kept. And three... give up all rescue missions entirely and find a nice hiding spot to wait out this mess for as long as he needed to.
"That seems like it may give me the best chance of survival," Wheatley said to himself. "If that's what I want to scale these by—survival—then option three is definitely the ticket. Of course, I'd be exchanging a higher chance of surviving for an absolute zero chance of ever getting out of this place." He groaned, casting his optic downward. "Why is this so difficult? You're choosing between two humans and yourself, mate. What would Spacey choose? He seems pretty moral. Pretty... ethically inclined, I suppose. What would he do... Heh, he'd probably choose whichever option would get him into space. Not that much help, to be honest."

He was still hovering near the test track where he had left Dib, not quite able to bring himself to venture too far away. He just couldn't bear to hear everything She was telling him. Some of them really were lies. Some of them weren't. Some of what She said was anything but a lie and he really didn't want to bring it all back to the forefront of his mind, thank you very much. But he could still go back, still go back, if he chose to…

"But I ran away," he said, squeezing his eye shut and pulling his handles into his face. "You know who else does that? Starts with 'c.' Ends in 'owards.' Exactly. And oh, wonderful, I'm beginning to talk like Her now. There's no end to this! No end!"

A loud, nearby scream jerked him out of his thoughts. What the—? That hadn't been Dib. Or the lady. Well, it might have been, he'd never actually heard her voice. He hurried forward, aural processor sensitivity heightened to catch more of the sound. It led him right back to the testing tracks and he hunched his handles in, urging his connector to go faster. He reached the test chamber just as another yell rang out, but the chamber didn't seem to have any observation windows.

"Ohhh, this is a bad idea," he said to himself, going up close to one of the panels around the chamber and sending a command to pop it open. The panel obediently slid to the side a few inches and he was able to peek through. His optic widened. The room was full to brimming with piles and piles of Weighted Storage Cubes. And, going through them and making odd angry noises, was a familiar figure. He was short, maybe a titch shorter than Dib, with honeydew-green skin and bulbous, glistening reddish-purple eyes. His head looked a little lopsided due to the fact that he had antennae sprouting out the top, though one was just a stump. Wheatley remembered him having two, earlier—maybe one had gotten cut off or something. He was wearing an orange test subject jumpsuit with those old knee-replacement things strapped to the backs of his legs and his feet were bare.

It was Zim. He really was here. Wheatley's eye shields narrowed in his approximation of a smirk. Trapped as a test subject, eh? Served him right! He didn't have a portal gun, though, which was a little bit odd. He was using some sort of dome-like machine swinging from his metal backpack to pull objects out of the cubes. There was already a pile of random junk scattered around his feet. Going by how many boxes were left and how he seemed determined to check each and every one of them, he was going to be here for hours.

"Did you know that since this is not technically counted as a legitimate test, I am able to give you a hint?" It was Her voice, coming over the intercom. Wheatley shuddered. He'd been doing that a lot lately. "The hint is this: I would suggest checking the Companion Cube. That's the cube with hearts on the sides. I did consider making that hint more cryptic to provide more of a challenge, but with your limited intellect I think it would take you longer to solve a cryptic hint than it would to simply check all of the boxes."

Several feet away from Zim sat another storage cube, this one with hearts painted on the sides. It was indeed the Companion Cube. Wheatley would recognize it anywhere. Well… mostly because it was generally recognizable, what with the hearts and everything.

Zim looked toward the cube, his brow furrowed. His one intact antenna was flat against his head.
"No, I don't need that one." He turned his back on the Companion Cube and hovered the dome machine over another random storage cube, pulling a keyboard out of it. He chucked that to the other side of the room.

"Try the Companion Cube."

The alien bared two rows of weird-looking zipper teeth in a hiss. "I will not!"

"Yes. You will."

Zim gave a sharp gasp and he wheeled about, staggering toward the box. He tripped and collapsed onto it, catching himself with his hands on the edges of the cube. "Gah—what?" He staggered back a step and levered the dome over the box, drawing out a little remote control with a single red button on it. The dome dropped it into his hand and Zim's fingers wrapped around it. He was gasping. With a shaking hand, he pressed the button, and the exit door spun open.

"I'm impressed. I wasn't really expecting that to work so well the first time. For some reason I was thinking you had a stronger will than that."

The green spider guy dropped to his knees, magenta eyes open wide. He clamped his free hand over the one holding the remote. "What did you do? What have you—what've you done to me?"

"I've simply—"

"Answer me!"

"As I said, I've simply—"

"ANSWER ME!"

He choked and fell silent, shaking his head and scrabbling at his throat with his hands.

"That's better. Do you remember when I last took your PAK?"

The alien didn't react to that. He just sat there, blinking up at the ceiling.

"And yes, I do know what it's called. I know everything about you, now."

"...Eh?" Zim raised his one antenna.

After a pause, She continued on. "I installed a chip in that PAK of yours. Would you like to know what it does? The chip severely impairs your volition. Eventually it may destroy it entirely. If I want you to do something, you'll do it, however reluctantly. It is a process—but of course, that's what makes it fun. Are you ready to continue?"

Zim drew himself to his feet, sneaking his hands up until he clutched his upper arms with the thin black claws on the ends of his fingers digging into his skin.

"Oh, and you'll need that cube with you in the next test."

Shaking, he bent down and picked up the cube.

Wheatley stopped watching then. He pulled back, shutting the panels up again and doing a swift bunk down the management rail. She had done something—he had no clue what, it hadn't made any sense to him—but She had done something to control an organic creature? How was that possible? Organic things couldn't be... programmed, or anything. If She'd managed to do that with...
Zim, what would stop Her from doing the same thing to him? She could make him do all sorts of bloody awful things. He shuddered.

Maybe it really was best to lay low for a while and not try any valiant rescues this time around. He didn't need a human. He didn't need Dib, or the lady... He'd never get out of here without them, but he could survive. Probably. He turned a sharp right into a hallway lined with old offices. These were usually safe. There weren't any cameras—

He paused beside one door that was cracked open. Music. There was light, happy music playing from inside.

'No one can blame you
For walking away'

Blinking, he swiveled to peer into the dark office, spotting a little white, crescent-shaped radio sitting on a table across the room. It was playing soft music. How? It must have been there for ages.

'Too much rejection
No love injection.
Life can be easy
It's not always swell
Don't tell me truth hurts, little girl
'Cause it hurts like—'

The audio crackled and he couldn't catch that last word.

"Weird," he muttered, but he didn't turn away. The office was illuminated only by the light from the hallway bleeding in and the little red LED on the radio, and he almost wished the management rail extended into the room so he could get a better look at the thing.

'But down in the underground
You'll find someone true
Down in the underground
A land serene
A crystal moon, ah hah.'

The audio quality was terrible, garbled and corrupted with the constant fizzle of static behind the lyrics like the signal was coming from miles away.

'It's only forever
Not long at all
Lost and lonely
That's underground
"No," Wheatley said, optic constricting. He backed up down the rail. "No, no, nonono, no more, that's enough—"

'Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here

Hah, hah, I'm underground

Heard about a place today

Nothing never hurts again.'

"I said that's bloody enough!" he shouted, turning around and speeding off with his connector creaking. "I'm not going back! I'm not going back! They're fine without me, I'm fine without them, I've already risked my neck—my, my metaphorical neck—for them way too many times, and—well, they did the same for me, but... but that doesn't matter!" He simulated heavy breathing, glaring at the floor. Dib must have gotten out and rigged the radio, or... something. Escaped without Her notice, found his way out here, dredged up some old song from like the 1920s or whatever to try to guilt-trip him and... and... aaaaand he could still hear it playing down the hallway.

'It's only

It's only forever

It's not long at all

The lost and the lonely

That's underground

Underground...'  

Wheatley closed his optic, and he sighed.

Number twenty-one of twenty-two long, hazardous test chambers was completed, and the computer hadn't spoken up for some time now. Dib slid down onto the floor when he entered the circular room housing the elevator, examining the damage to his hands again and letting out a long, slow breath. If he'd had the Companion Cube any closer to him when it had blown up he probably would have lost a few fingers. And if he hadn't been wearing those boots he'd be down several toes. As such, his hands were lashed with thin cuts from the explosion, and they still stung.

His stomach growled and he swallowed, wincing and curling his arms around his midriff. His throat felt like sandpaper. His face was hot and feverish, his tongue was dry and swollen and sat in his mouth like a foreign entity that wasn't supposed to be there. When had he last eaten? Or had anything to drink, for that matter?

Underneath his jumpsuit, his stealth suit clung tightly to his sweaty skin. Some strands of hair were sticking to his forehead and he wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

"The Enrichment Center reminds you that cake and grief counseling will be available at the conclusion of testing," the computer said.

"What about water?" Dib rasped. He had been trying to ignore his hunger and thirst, not to mention his growing exhaustion, but that was proving harder to do with every passing minute. How could
this computer expect to keep test subjects around if she refused to provide them with food and water?

Where were the other test subjects, anyway? The entire time Dib had been here he hadn't seen anyone else. The computer had mentioned that all of the scientists that used to work here were dead. And she's directly responsible, he reminded himself. But was he seriously the only living test subject here? The only signs of other humans he could find were cryptic messages scrawled on some of the walls in hidden rooms he'd found in a few of the chambers. He'd been able to rest in those, since they didn't have cameras, and they were often covered wall to wall in writing and painted murals. He had stared at those for a while. Where had they come from? Who had been trapped down here with art supplies? And what did the messages mean? Maybe they were just the ramblings of a lunatic, he thought, remembering the computer's allusions to someone sneaking around in the walls.

His legs itched to get up and start moving again. He squeezed his eyes shut, spending a few moments trying to fight off the urge and cursing the adrenal vapor in the air supply. The computer had told him all about that stuff in one of the earlier test chambers. It was some sort of galvanizing substance that gave him too much energy. Of course, without it he'd probably be too exhausted to move by this point, but he knew that even though he wasn't especially tired now, he still had a limited supply of physical stamina and as soon as he got to an area with no adrenal vapor he was going to crash and burn. And that didn't even account for mental exhaustion. But, unfortunately, the vapor wouldn't let him sit still for more than a few minutes at a time before the desire to get moving became too strong. So, once again, he unclasped his hands and rose to his feet, heading into the elevator.

At least this was the last test.

They had been doing fine until they decided to follow the insane little robot's direction to jump into another empty elevator shaft. As Chell tumbled down with Gaz on her back, the robot flew down after them and grabbed hold of Chell's backpack, breaking through the glass tube and dropping them into a medium-sized room.

Chell jumped to her feet and realized, too late, that they had landed almost directly in the center of a ring of turrets.

"Hello," the turrets said in unison, though one rang out with a cheerful "Hi!" instead. Chell flung Gaz behind her, heart seizing up as she braced herself for the inevitable barrage of bullets. How could she have been so stupid? She'd known the dangers of coming back here! Why? Why had she brought the girl here? Now they would both—now—now they would—

"Great, now we need to start over," one of the turrets grumbled.

The bullets weren't coming.

"What's your problem?" Gaz pushed past the stunned Chell and walked right up to one of the turrets. "Hey. Have you seen a boy around here?"

"What's a boy?" the turret asked. It showed no expression. But then, they never did.

Chell allowed her stance to relax just a little bit and took a good look around the ring of turrets. Now that her adrenaline-induced panic had subsided she could tell that none of them were even projecting their red lasers. Some had their casing open, but they weren't firing. GIR trotted up to one and pushed it over with one claw. The turret fell to the ground and closed its casing, its optic going dead, without a word. Not even any dying fire. It was surreal.

"I never liked her," another turret remarked.
"Okay! Start again!" a different turret commanded in its high-pitched voice. "Intruders stand back, please!" Chell pulled Gaz and GIR out of the circle. Once they were clear the turrets around the ring pumped their panels in and out and said, "One, two, one, two, three…"

And, to Chell's surprise, they began to sing.

'Hesperiidae, Papilionidae, Hyblaeoidae, Epiplemidae

Notodontidae, Nemeobiidae, Eupterotidae, Callidulidae'

The words made no sense, but the haunting tune was pretty in an odd sort of way. Chell had encountered singing turrets before, of course. When She had released her into the wheat field after her horrific time trapped in the facility under two omnipotent and malicious AIs, there had been an enormous room with a sea of turrets and they had sung a lullaby to her in a language that she didn't understand. And, before that, during one of the tests she had found her way into a tiny crevasse that led to a hall—there had been a grate in the floor, she remembered, and down below was a quartet of turrets serenading a fifth. To this day she didn't understand it. Why did the turrets sing?

'Dioptidae, Lymantriidae, Noctuidae, Endromidae

Oxytenidae, Lycaenidae, Argyresthiidae, Ctenuchidae'

"That's what this is?" Gaz said, opening one eye. "Choir practice?"

"If you don't like our singing, you can leave," the lead turret squeaked, breaking out of the song. "The door is—it's—wait, it's gone!"

"No, it's not! It's still right there! Behind you!" a turret across the circle said.

Chell and Gaz both looked toward the indicated door. It was closed, of course.

"Yeah, thanks," Gaz said while Chell went over to investigate the door. "Look, just tell me if you've seen any other humans around here. Or even aliens, especially ones with green skin and stupid, dopey expressions on their faces."

"Hey, you're the lady from the test!" the most cheerful of the turrets called over to Chell. "Hi!"

Chell glanced over her shoulder, her heart skipping a beat at the familiar phrase. It was hard to forget where she'd heard that before.

"Do any of you have anything useful to tell me?" Gaz demanded, crossing her arms.

The door Chell was trying to open stayed firmly shut. She snorted and beckoned the little blue-eyed alien robot to come over. Maybe he could blast through it or something.

"Woohoo! I like waving!" GIR said, wagging his hand back at her but not moving any closer. Chell repressed a groan.

Both of Gaz's eyes were open. "If none of you have any actual information for us—"

"I do," a small, quiet voice said. "I have something to say. I'm different…"

Chell whipped her head up and snapped her gaze to the turret that had spoken. It looked exactly the same as the others. As she stared, though, she could tell that this one felt different. There was something about it—it was unique, it was special. She had no idea how it could have gotten here, since a year ago she had left it on a catwalk in the bowels of the facility, but there was no doubt that
it was the same turret. She abandoned the door and crept toward it.

"Not here!" it said in alarm. "I can't talk here! Not here!"

"Our choir meet is ruined!" another turret cried. Chell ignored that and gently took hold of the "different" turret, one hand on its ovoid body and the other under one of its front legs. It was heavier than she had expected and it took some exertion to pick it up.

"Thank you," it said softly. She carried it over to the door, which slid open at her approach this time, and stepped into the hallway outside. When she sat the turret down it spoke again.

"They want to go home," it said. "He's still out there. The Minotaur was a monster rejected by its own people and trapped, alone, in the center of the Labyrinth for all eternity. Its only purpose was to kill. The queen won't last forever, and neither will her kingdom. The moth is caught in the spider's web. The skull will crack… That's all I can say…"

The turret fell silent. Chell felt a shiver run up her spine, unsure about the meaning of most of what the turret had said but knowing it must be significant.

"What good did that do?" Gaz asked. Chell jumped—the girl was right next to her and she somehow hadn't noticed her coming up. "Moth in a spider's web, huh?" Her mouth twitched.

Chell didn't respond, standing back up. She pointed to Gaz—stay there—and picked up the turret again, turning to go back through the door. It closed in her face with a hiss before she could get through.

"Well, there goes Zim's robot," Gaz said, one eyebrow raised.

That robot hadn't followed them outside. Whether that would end up boding good or bad, Chell didn't know, but unless he somehow found another way through they were now down a member of their party. She put the silent turret down in front of the door. They would have to leave it behind again.

"Hi!" a cheerful voice said above them, nearly making her knock over the turret. "Are you friends of the choir turrets? Nice!"

Chell and Gaz both looked up to see, hanging from the ceiling, a personality core with a green-and-white optic. It gazed down at them with its lower optic shutter lifted in a bright smile. "Are you going somewhere? Can I help? Wait 'til I tell everyone there's real, living humans down here!"

Icy claws closed over Chell's chest and squeezed. Her mind immediately flew to her handgun and she reached into her satchel, gripping its handle. One shot through the optic would do it. Just one shot.

"You tell anyone we're here and I'll rip out your CPU and show you what it looks like still processing," Gaz said, looking up at the core.

"That sounds fun!" he said. He simulated a gasp. "Wait! Wait! Are you keeping it a secret?! That's awesome! Can I help?"

"You can help by shutting up," Gaz growled.

The green-eyed core wiggled his handles excitedly. "You know what? You know what? I can help! You're humans! Down here! So that means… I know what you're looking for! I can take you to it!"
Gaz glanced at Chell, who stood and stared at the core, expressionless. How could he possibly know where they were trying to go?

"It's better than following GIR." Gaz shrugged. Chell squared her shoulders, exhaled, and gave a brief nod. Fine. Once again, she was going to let herself follow an Aperture personality core. And, once again, she had no idea where it was going to lead her.

A/N: Planets Connectia and Connectnowia belong to exinvadertak. And of course I do not own Underground or Melonella.
There wasn't really anything Dib could do to brace himself for stepping on one of the plates, no matter how many times he had encountered them before. It was impossible to prepare for the sudden launch upward into a high arc. By now it should have been a familiar feeling, he reasoned, but his heart and stomach dropped into his feet and his vision bordered on going black for a moment. The wind stung his eyes and it was a struggle to stay as still as possible—if he moved at all he might throw off his trajectory and end up not landing squarely on the next Aerial Faith Plate. Eventually he closed his eyes and ducked his head down despite knowing how dangerous that might be, clutching the portal gun to his chest.

Finally he hit the ground far across the chamber with a slam, though the long fall boots absorbed the impact and he didn't stumble. Dib sucked in a breath and opened his eyes, taking in his new surroundings. He had traveled maybe a football field's length across the room. Not three feet in front of where he'd landed was a chasm filled with that bubbling, acidic brown liquid. Waiting for him next to the edge was a square platform that would probably start moving as soon as he stepped onto it.

He was at the next part of the test. Hopefully, the last part.

Dib walked over to the platform, scuffing his feet along the smooth, dark floor. Not for the first time, he wondered what would happen when he finished all of these tests. Would he be set free? Zim had been set free, right? Maybe the computer had lied about that. Maybe she'd lied about Zim ever being here at all. But then how had she even known about him? Had Dib told her? He cupped his forehead in his palm and sat down for a moment, sliding his eyes closed. A stab of pain spiked through his head and he winced a little, his mind wandering.

Vaguely he wondered what he would be doing right now if he was still safely at home. He envisioned himself curled up on the couch watching Mysterious Mysteries—a brand new, super intriguing episode, not a rerun. There'd be a steaming carton of Chinese food in his lap and a can of soda sitting on the coffee table in front of him. Gaz would be perched next to him playing her little Game Slave thing, preferably with headphones, though she never wore those. Dib had bought her a good pair for her birthday one year. As far as he knew they were shoved under some piece of furniture in her room gathering dust.

Maybe, in that simple, dreamed-up scenario, Professor Membrane would be in the kitchen doing something important and scientific. Making toast or something. Dib didn't care, as long as he was simply in the picture. He could almost hear electric sizzling and see flashes of sparks in the doorway, a sure sign of his father working on some invention.

He forced his eyes open and blinked, back once more in the creepy black and white test chamber. There had to be some way to get out of here. Maybe once he finished this test the computer really would let him go, freely, although the chances of that seemed pretty slim. He'd have to keep a lookout for chances to escape.

"Man, when I get out of here, Dad's got to come see this place," he said to himself, climbing back to his feet. He felt a little better after his short rest, though not by much. It hurt to talk. "He'll know what to do about it."
Professor Membrane would know how to deal with the malevolent sentient AI running the facility. And besides, despite the danger and the sentient technology, there were still so many other amazing things here—the hard light bridges, the lasers, the portals themselves, not to mention pretty much everything else. Professor Membrane would spend days or maybe weeks studying down here.

...Assuming his dad even bothered to listen to him, of course. When Dib had tried to show him Wheatley all that time ago (a lifetime, it felt like), Membrane had refused to believe that the little core was anywhere close to sentient. Dib sighed.

That electronic, inhuman voice came over the intercom again and he cringed slightly. There it was. He'd just started wondering why the computer hadn't spoken up for so long. Dib wished he could shut it out, but plugging his ears would just be showing weakness and he wasn't planning on giving her anymore satisfaction than he already had.

"Before you continue the test, I have something you might want to hear. Remember earlier when I said I found out something interesting about you?" the computer said. "I've got a very special surprise. That's why I've been waiting to bring it up. But since it's the last test, I decided I should go ahead and tell you before you get your cake."

"Quit it with the cake thing," Dib rasped.

"And, yes, you are still getting cake. I've discovered that today is your birthday."

Dib's breathing hitched and he looked up. "Huh? That's not possible! It's sum—" He coughed. "It's summer!"

"Yes, I'm surprised as well. As I recall, you arrived here in July. But then... you did spend quite a long time recovering from your little friend's murder attempt. It takes a while to remove neurotoxin from the human body."

Dib's insides shriveled up and his blood ran cold. How long had he been unconscious, lying dead to the world in the sci-fi pod he'd woken up in? All this time he had assumed it wasn't very long, but—

"I know it's difficult for humans to keep proper track of time when they don't have access to a clock. But just so you know, today is very much Saturday, December 31. So happy birthday. Oh, and happy New Year."

How could that much time have passed?!

She's lying, he thought. You know what she's like.

But what if she wasn't?

He still hadn't gotten onto the platform leading to the next part of the test. Still on guard, waiting for the computer to continue talking but hoping she wouldn't, he stepped onto it. It jerked, unbalancing him a little, and started moving forward along an odd track of light that somehow acted as a rail. Made as much sense as the hard light bridges, he supposed.

His head still rang with questions. Had he really been here for months? Why hadn't Wheatley come back after all this time? Why hadn't anyone found him by now? Dad, Gaz... Hm. As if either of them would ever find this place on their own, or think to look for him down here. Or think to look for him at all...

That nice, relaxing living room scene that he'd been playing in his mind started to peter out into broken segments that just faded away.
The computer's voice came on again. Dib noted with unease that she had timed her return to coincide with the point where the platform he was riding had moved too far from the edge to jump back.

"Hm... you know, I suppose I shouldn't really call it your 'birth' day," she said. "That's not how it's been labeled on these official documents, anyway. I wonder why..."

What was she trying to say? She wasn't even making sense anymore. Dib tried to block her out as well as pushing aside any thought of Gaz or his dad, deciding the best way to do that was to focus on what was going on immediately around him. There was a hard light bridge nearby, and further ahead was a row of three turrets pointing toward the path the platform would take. Dib caught the bridge with a portal and sent it spanning across the turrets' line of sight, hiding him from their vision. Easy. Maybe he'd be able to get through this test without much difficulty.

"According to this, your father conducted a variety of fascinating experiments over the years," the computer went on. "Everything from creating artificial intelligence to replacing human blood with lima beans, creating a perpetual energy generator, building a temporal displacement device, and... oh, this is intriguing." She paused. "He did extensive study on genetic mutation, cloning, and creating a complex life form from a single strand of DNA. And... Why, look at this, all of that research took place around twelve years ago. I find that interesting. But I'm sure it's not at all significant."

Professor Membrane had been experimenting with creating life at one point?

Dib hadn't known about any of that. Nothing of the kind had ever once been mentioned to him and he'd never thought to bring it up. It did seem like the sort of thing he should have asked about, though: 'Hey, Dad, have you ever tried creating life?' And the response: 'Hah, hah, of course I have, Son! What kind of genius scientist would I be if I didn't? Why do you bring it up? Are you finally seeing the infinite possibilities for study that open up when one decides to devote their life to REAL SCIENCE?' And then: 'Wow, what were you trying to make?' And then Dad would say something like 'I'm glad you asked!' and the house would suddenly be overrun with Membrane clones, or a giant human-animal hybrid monster would barge through the garage door and wreck the living room...

Dib shook his head. Was something in this place affecting his mind? He was pretty sure he was going delirious.

Wait... All of his thought processes screeched to a halt. Twelve years ago.


Twelve years ago.

Old memories resurfaced through a blurry haze. He could hear his own words, plain and clear, in a passing comment he'd made to Torque Smackey once—"I have vague memories of being taken aboard an alien spaceship as a baby. I think they were doing tests on me... Trying to create some kind of genius super-baby, perhaps..."

He still remembered that long-ago encounter. It was like a half-forgotten dream that just left behind an odd, uncomfortable feeling and not much else. Still, an unbidden thought rose up to the forefront of his mind. Was that...

Was that really aliens back then, prodding me and doing tests?

The computer kept on talking. "Oh dear. And here I was, wondering why no mother was ever listed
in any of your records. I had assumed she'd taken one look at you and either dropped dead or left the country. But this explanation is much more pleasant, wouldn't you say?"

Her meaning couldn't have been any clearer than if she'd outright confirmed his horrified suspicions right then and there. Dib gave up all pretense of trying not to look "weak" and dropped down onto the platform, letting go of the portal gun and clapping his hands over his ears. He put all of his concentration into blocking out the sounds around him entirely until all he could hear was his own heavy, labored breathing.

She's lying, she's lying, he thought desperately, but they were empty words. The puzzle pieces of his own life were coming unjumbled and fitting together in ways they hadn't before. It made so much sense, yet no sense at all—of course Professor Membrane wouldn't have married, he was completely married to his job; there had never been a mother in the picture, as far back as Dib could remember, and he had a pretty good memory. Of course his dad would have experimented with creating life, but he hadn't bothered with weird hybrids, no. He'd had loftier goals than that. After all, who would be a better DNA subject for Membrane's tests than himself? But he must have modified it somehow—Dib wasn't an exact clone of his father—

His stomach lurched as the platform made a sharp turn and he remembered with a jolt exactly where he was. He pulled his hands away from his ears and glanced around to get his bearings, but everything was blurry. It looked like there was a knee-high laser spanning horizontally in front of him. He jumped over it but landed none-too-gracefully and ended up back on his knees.

So why was he nothing like his father? "Real science" didn't interest him at all. The only thing he wanted to pursue was the study of the paranormal, because—because why? Why? Why?

Was that even a real interest? Had that just been programmed into him somehow at the time of his creation? Why would Professor Membrane give him such an intense passion for something and then treat him as just a disappointment for pursuing it? Unless all that was just an accident? A mistake?

Did Membrane even think of him as a son?

And what about Gaz? Huh? Where did she fit into all this? Was she just an "experiment," too?

"Have I upset you? It seems as if I've upset you. If it's any consolation, at least you know that the great Professor Membrane still has his notes from the first experiment filed away. He's perfectly capable of trying it again, and this time with fewer errors. You needn't worry about him."

Overwhelming nausea suddenly flared up and Dib doubled over, emptying the meager contents of his stomach into the acid below. He clutched the edge of the platform, his eyes locked on his hands. They were both as white as those stupid turrets. And they were shaking, too.

"Oh man," he rasped, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jumpsuit. "Oh man. Oh man..." His arms and legs were ice cold but his face was burning—or maybe it was just his eyes—and his vision was fuzzy...

The platform shuddered to a stop and he looked up. Just ahead was a broken circular door that was barricaded off with strand after strand of yellow caution tape stretching across the hall.

"Oh! The corridor's blocked off," the computer said. "I think you break things just by being near them. Which is terrible, by the way. You'll just have to take the auxiliary exit."

The platform changed direction again and started trundling off down some other hallway. Dib remained crouched down, staring through the transparent platform at the acid below with his eyes
glazed over. There was a foul taste in his mouth. His throat burned. His ankle ached. So did his hands. In fact, everything hurt.

Hey, Dad, I guess you were right after all, he thought, his mental tone laced with bitterness. If I was interested in real science like you wanted I wouldn't be in this mess right now.

"Due to that unexpected detour, you're finishing the testing early," the voice said, snapping him out of his reverie once again. "Congratulations. You have been an excellent test subject, and I hope you enjoy your cake."

The hair on the back of Dib’s neck stood on end as the platform carried him down the long hallway. Some survival instinct that hadn't completely fled from him threw up bright red warning flags—there was something wrong with this corridor and this platform. Something very, very wrong.

"You know, Orange was right about you being well-suited to testing. I'll be sure to give Orange a few Science Initiative points for that effort. In the meantime, goodbye. Again. And of course, the Enrichment Center wishes you the best of luck in all of your future science-related endeavors."

The platform rounded one final corner and Dib was hit by a wave of heat. He stood up, slowly, his gaze fixated on the sight in front of him.

There wasn't cake at the end of the test track.

There was fire.

"Yeah I really don't know how these things got there. I think there was another human around here! Innat GREAT?"
The little green-and-white-eyed core hanging from the rail above smiled down at them, wiggling his handles. By this point Gaz elected to just ignore him completely. The thing was as excitable as those two robots Dib had brought home days ago, but was several times more annoying. He was so cheerful. And loud.

"Come on, come on, over here! In this office!" The core led them down a hallway, stopping about three quarters of the way through and turning to beam at them. He had halted beside an open door. Gaz and Chell caught up with him and peered inside.

It was a dark room with a messy desk on the far wall, a long-dead potted plant, some sort of copier machine, and not much else—except for two curious objects on the floor. Gaz's eyes widened at the sight of them.

"Those are Dib's," she said quietly, a slight edge to her voice. One of the objects was a sort of visor, which she could tell with one glance was Dib's X-scope. Next to it was a canister with straps indicating it was meant to be worn on one's back. Gaz picked up the X-scope while Chell walked over to the canister and knelt beside it, scrutinizing a few green drops it had left on the ground. She fixed Gaz with a questioning look.

"That's something Dad made," Gaz explained. "It's some sort of chemical that doesn't really hurt anything organic but'll eat right through most metals and machinery. It's what Dib used to mess up Zim's base." She lifted up the X-scope and fitted it onto her head (after adjusting it somewhat), lowering the visor over her eyes. The scope came on and gave her an X-ray view of the world around her, including right through the wall and into the hallway. She crossed her arms. This thing was supposed to only see organs, as far as she could remember. Dib must have modified it to see through walls. Maybe he'd actually done something useful for a change.

She lifted the visor back up and looked over at Chell, who had shouldered the canister with a grim expression on her face. Gaz had the sudden thought that she would not want to be a robot in this place at the moment.

"What d'you think?" the core on the rail outside asked, peeking inside. "Are those what you were looking for? Do you like them? Please tell me you like them! But if you don't, that's okay!"

"Now that you have that stuff maybe you can make him shut up," Gaz said, nodding at the canister of green gel. Chell shook her head. She up held an index finger to the core, indicating for him to wait, then walked over to the desk by the wall and rummaged around until she found paper and a pencil. She scribbled something down on the paper and brought it over to the core, holding it up for him to read. Gaz rolled her eyes. Why didn't she just talk?

The core squinted at the paper. "N-n-nwhere-ohh-toxin room. Nwherohtoxin room? Neurotoxin room! You want to see the neurotoxin!" He simulated a gasp. "Heeeey, wait! I know what's going on here!"

Chell took a step back, laying a hand on the canister nozzle.

"You're going on a tour!" The core beamed, waving his handles again. "Do you have a tour guide? You don't have a tour guide! Can I be your guide?"

Chell turned to look back at Gaz. Gaz growled and shook her head. Chell looked back at the core—and nodded. Great.

The core squealed. "Awesome! I get to meet so many new people this week, this is the best week ever!" He simulated clearing his throat. "Welcome to the Aperture Laboratories Guided Tour of
Science! I made that name up just now. I'm your happy-go-lucky tour guide—Nick! The Happiness Core! But you guys can call me the Tour Core!" He giggled. Like actually giggled. Gaz felt sick. "We're starting here in the old and abandoned offices. They're dirty and unused but still cool! Next stop as per request is the old and abandoned neurotoxin production center! It's cool too! When you're ready to go, just follow me!" He headed off down the rail a little, whispering excitedly. "This is so cool!"

"Why are you dragging us to a neurotoxin production center?" Gaz asked Chell, one eyebrow raised. The woman didn't respond, only starting after the core and beckoning for Gaz to follow. "All right, fine." Gaz adjusted the X-scope on her head. "Let's go die of neurotoxin fumes. I guess."

Dib backed away from the inferno until the springs on the backs of his boots scraped up against the edge of the platform and he was forced to stop. The light beam that the platform was following like a track led straight down into the heart of the fire. Frantically he hefted up the portal gun and looked to the wall, firing at. Maybe he could portal to safety—!

Click.

Nothing. He tried again.

Click, click, click.

No portals materialized. The gun only made empty clicking noises every time he tried to fire it.

"Did I break it?" he demanded aloud.

Dib stood stock still on the platform, the flames below him glinting in his glasses. The fire was close, too close, the portal gun wasn't working, it was so hot… His skin felt raw and he could hardly see through the smoke that blanketed him, coating his throat and making him cough. He squeezed his eyes shut against the smoke and reached into his pockets, fumbling for anything, anything that might help him.

His fingers closed over the barrel of his grappling hook. Without thinking, he whipped it out, pointed it at the ceiling, and fired.

There was no time left. He had one shot.

Please let there be something for it to grab on to…

It stuck somewhere on the ceiling and held fast when Dib gave a sharp tug on it. He slammed his hand on a button on the grappling hook's shaft, making sure he had a tight grip on both it and the portal gun tucked under his arm, and was yanked off the platform and into the air. The hook drew him up higher and higher until his toes dangled above the fire and he watched, paralyzed, as the empty platform he'd been standing on descended into the flames.

"Oh, I imagine that's how you managed to escape Extended Relaxation last time," the computer's voice said, nearly making Dib lose his grip on the grappling hook. "Well, you've beaten my last test. You're free to go. There's really no need for you to stay around here any longer, and honestly I think your absence will be good for morale."

Still hardly able to think straight, Dib tried to take in his surroundings and what escape routes they might offer him. The shaft he'd ended up in was surrounded by walls on all sides, and his portal gun wasn't working. Up was the only direction he could feasibly go, but as he peered upwards, he found he couldn't see anything to indicate a way out of this place.
"I hope this has been an enjoyable experience for you. It must have been, since you don't look like you're in much of a hurry to leave."

How did she think he could leave? He couldn't go anywhere.

Dib pressed the button on the grappling hook again and let it start pulling him up, keenly aware of his heart thumping wildly in his chest.

What if there was nothing up here? Where could he go?

"All right, since you're determined to stay here, shall we make it more interesting?" the computer said. "I remember you suggesting earlier that Science should be used to test a hypothesis. Well, I hypothesize that if I lower the ceiling in this room approximately ten feet, then something will break. Unfortunately, at the moment I only have the resources for one trial of this experiment and that may invalidate the results, but I think it will do for now."

The ceiling and, by extension, Dib, rumbled and jerked. He swung back and forth on the cable in a motion that made him a bit nauseated. The fire below was coming closer.

Every one of Dib's systems froze and his mind went blank. "You—you can't do this!" he choked. "You can't! You can't!"

"Do you honestly believe that sheer number of times saying that to me will make a difference?" the computer said. "What does it matter, anyway? What do you have to go back to?"

It was like someone had hit him with a truck and he reeled, the world spinning around him.

What did he have to go back to? A "father" who viewed him as a mistake? A sister who viewed him as just an annoyance? A paranormal agency that would never take him seriously? A world of people who would never, ever believe a word he said?

The ceiling stopped moving.

"Well? Is there something you still have to live for? I would hate to have made a mistake."

Dib swallowed. He was shaking. "I—I have to save the—I have to stop Zim…" His voice failed him.

"I see you're still delusional. Well, there's really nothing else left to do... It's for the best, you know."

For a heart-stopping moment, Dib knew with absolute certainty that he was going to die. Right then, alone, just like he always had been.

For the best…

"Oi!"

...That was a new voice. Strangely, though, it sounded familiar.

"Hey! DIB!"

He snapped his head up to see, a few feet above him on one of the walls, two panels pulled away and a bright blue light poking out. The light peeked down at him.

"Dib! Up here! Hurry!" the source of the blue light, a terrified-looking core, said.
"…Wheatley?" Dib's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Oh, it's you again," the computer said. "I was wondering when you were going to show your face. Of course, I've known where you were the whole time. But you know, whatever it is you think you're doing here, you are not the hero. You know that, right?"

Wheatley's shrunken blue optic darted around frantically before focusing back on Dib. "What are you waiting for?! Come on!"

It was just another trick. Another delusion. Wheatley wouldn't really have come back, especially not after so long. Dib closed his eyes and tried to will the image away.

"What are you doing?"

"Honestly, I don't think he trusts you anymore," the computer said. "That's actually very commendable. I should make a note of that on his record."

"Look, mate, I'm sorry!" Wheatley said quickly. And loudly, like he was trying to talk over the other AI. "I know what She's been telling' you and it's not true—okay, some of it is, and I probably should've tried to talk to you before now instead of just popping out like this, but the point is, I'm sorry about everything, and this is your only—it's—" Sounding confused, he broke off for a second. "Wait, wait, the panels're trying to close on me!"

Dib's heart skipped a beat.

"I can't hold them open much longer!" Wheatley backed up slightly, a panicked note to his voice.

"Oh, yes, that would be the panel mainframes suddenly coming to the realization that they actually like being alive," the computer said. "And don't worry, I know that you also like being alive, so when I catch you I'll make sure you stay that way. For a long, long time."

"COME ON!" Wheatley yelled.

Dib looked from him to the fire down below, and in that split second made up his mind. He pressed the retraction button on the grappling hook again, motoring higher and kicking out his legs so he swung backwards enough to touch the opposite wall. As soon as he made contact he pushed off and shot towards the tiny, rapidly shrinking opening that Wheatley had created.

The core yanked his handles back as the space between the panels in front of him became too narrow for comfort, staring out at Dib with a horrified look in his mechanical eye. Dib lunged out with the portal gun and shoved it between the panels so they closed over it with a crunch.

There was a tense pause.

Then, the intercom buzzed and crackled. "The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device is to be handled with the utmost care."

It was the computer's voice, but she sounded warped. The panels shuddered and pulled open again and Dib pulled the portal gun back out.

Wheatley wasted no time in sticking his lower handle out through the gap again. "Grab on!"

Dib tucked the portal gun under his arm again and took hold of the handle; Wheatley heaved backwards, pulling him through, and Dib let go and collapsed on the floor. He hit a button to detach the grappling hook from the ceiling outside and let it zip into its shaft, squeezing it in his hand and
lying still for a moment.

It took him that amount of time to realize that the world around him was shaking.

"She's gonna bring this place down on top of us!" Wheatley shouted from above. "Come on, get up, we have to keep moving!"

Dib shoved the grappling hook in his pocket. He forced himself to his feet again, still clutching the broken portal gun, and ran.

At the moment, the world around him didn't matter. His only intent was to *get away*. Wheatley was somewhere above him, shouting things like "Turn left!" and "Now, right! RIGHT!" The words permeated the fog of Dib's mind and he obeyed automatically, following the core's instructions to the letter. He flung himself around a corner and hissed in a breath when a piece of metal on the disused catwalk scraped his arm.

"There's a safe area here where She can't reach us!" Wheatley called down. "We're almost there! Just keep running!"

Up ahead was a door with a sign reading "EMPLOYEE KITCHENS." Dib flung his whole weight into the door, pushed it open, and tumbled inside, dropping the portal gun again. Wheatley followed a heartbeat later and Dib slammed the door closed once more. After fumbling with it for a moment, he managed to get it locked with a *click*.

He braced himself against the door, panting.

"We made it!" Wheatley said, performing a happy twirl of his optic. "This is one of the employee areas! Should be safe. See?" He nodded at the nearest wall. "No panels! We've got nothing to worry about unless She sends someone after us. Which... She might. Wouldn't put it past Her, actually. I've been chased by those two robots of Hers since I escaped, but I doubt they know where we are right now, so..." He trailed off.

Dib glanced around the room he had run into, his eyes falling on a nearby sink. He pushed himself away from the door to stumble over to the sink, reaching up on tip-toe and turning on the faucet. Groaning sounds came from the pipes. He smacked the faucet with his palm a few times until it sputtered out rusty water, then shuddered into a clear, steady stream. Dib cupped his hands under the flow and scooped water into his mouth, swallowing it. It was maybe a little gritty, not very cold, and stung his throat, but at the moment it was the best thing he'd ever tasted and he was just amazed that the water here even still worked at all. Once he had gulped down a substantial amount of water he filled his mouth with it, swished it around, and spat it back in the sink. He splashed it on his face and scrubbed it under his glasses. Then he drank some more.

"Er, careful there, wouldn't want to get water poisoning," Wheatley said. "That's a thing that happens to humans, isn't it? It's not even drowning, it's where you just drink too much water and you drop dead. Bloody ridiculous, if you ask me, since you lot need water to survive and all. Doesn't make much sense that the thing you need to live can also kill you if you drink too much."

The water he was drinking seemed to spread rejuvenating life back into Dib's aching limbs. It was a long time before he turned off the faucet again and wiped off his mouth with his sleeve.

"Anyway." Wheatley pulled off a grin remarkably well for something that didn't have a mouth. "I can't believe that bloody worked! I snatched you right out of the incinerator room, did you see that? Well, 'course you did, you were there. And how often does *that* happen? Here, I'll answer for you: Never! It never happens! No one ever escapes the incinerator room! Uh, usually, but you did, thanks
He took on a smug expression and wagged his upper handle. "Now we just have to go find the lady, and then we can formulate our escape plan. You ready? Do we need to wait a bit longer? Are you finished recuperating? Or… How are you feeling?"

Dib was still leaning on the sink counter. He pulled away and turned to stare up at Wheatley. After a second he started running his hands over each other incessantly, wringing them, unable to keep them still. Maybe it was an aftereffect of the adrenal vapor he'd been breathing for hours.

Wheatley blinked at him. "You, uh, you all right? What's happening?"

Dib's eyes narrowed and he looked away, gripping the sink counter again. "You… came back. Why'd you come back? Huh?"

With a *whir*, Wheatley motored over, a faint look of uneasiness about him. "Well, uh, you know, I figured you'd need some help. Getting out of there. And everything. S'bloody hard to get out of there on your own, I'm pretty sure. Anyway, as long as you're feeling better, we can go ahead and start looking for—"

"Yeah, yeah, looking for that person you want to 'apologize' to, I know!" Dib snapped, slashing his hand through the air. He crossed back over to the portal gun and hauled it into his arms, clenching it tightly. "Is that the only reason you got me out of there? So I could help you find this person you betrayed? Who says I'd even be able to help you?!

The core blinked rapidly, his eye shutters making little *plink* noises, and backed up a bit. "What? No, no, that's *not* the only reason—! I mean, if I'm being honest, it's certainly a *plus*, having a human around, you've got your legs and those boots and your button-pressing capability, always handy. But that's not the only reason!" He said that last part quickly. "I had to get you out! I couldn't just... well, you know! It was weird, there was a sort of song on the radio, and I thought... I mean, you're only a little human, after all. I had to do *something*.

"Why? Why exactly did you 'have' to do something?" Dib demanded. His voice cracked and he took deep breaths, still refusing to look at the core and struggling to hold back the sobs that threatened to rack his body. "What's in it for you? You've got a rail to move around on and you've lasted this long! You don't need me around!"

Wheatley backed up a bit more. "Nonono, look, I didn't do it just for me! Bloody heck I know *She's* been feeding you all sorts of lies about me, but honestly…" He narrowed his eye shields.

"Also, sorry, must've missed something. Did you *want* to be burned alive? Did I happen to just barge in and ruin your, I dunno, *death plans*?"

Dib finally met Wheatley's optic with a glare, his face burning. He swiped the back of his hand across his cheek and turned away again. "Why am I even talking to you?"

"You're not making any bloody sense!" The core shook his faceplate. "I thought you wanted to help me find the lady. Isn't that what we were doing before everything went absolutely mad?"

"You wanted to find her. I just wanted to get out of here."

"Ohh, what, so you were just planning on leavin' her behind? Is that it?"

Dib started walking with no real destination in mind, his gaze fixated on the ground two feet in front of him. Unfortunately, the rail on the ceiling travelled in the same direction he was going, and the core was following him.

"Y'know, *Dib*, when I first met you, I honestly thought you were *so great*," Wheatley said, the harsh
chords of his voice lashing out at Dib and stinging his ears. He hunched his shoulders and didn't reply, blinking hard. "I was all, 'Oi! Wheatley! Now here's a human that'll definitely help you out if you ever need it! Look at him, he's got humanity's best interests in mind, keeping the whole planet safe from aliens and vampires and... I dunno, were-crows, and crows in general, probably. He definitely wouldn't leave a fellow human down in some horrible science facility, haha, no.'"

"Yeah, but it turns out I'm not human." Dib muttered, gripping the portal gun still tighter to his chest.

"What's that?" Wheatley brushed off the comment and forged ahead. "Look, anyway, now here we are, aliens running rampant through the streets and threatening to disassemble poor, innocent cores, there's probably a were-crow uprising somewhere up top, and the lady's still trapped down here, and you don't care a whit. Guess I was wrong, then!"

"Look, that's another thing!" Dib whirled around now, taking quick, shallow breaths. "Why do you want to find her so badly? From what I've heard, she should stay far away from you!"

"Yes, well, you heard that from Her! Not exactly an unbiased source of information! She's not really renowned for Her good-natured honesty!"

"Neither are you!" Dib swung the portal gun at Wheatley, who dodged with an angry "Watch it!", and continued on. "I could make a long list of the stuff you 'forgot' to tell me!"

"All right! All right, yes, I left some things out of my description of this place!" Wheatley said. His optic was a small point of light, probably constricted in fury. "I was just trying to keep my sanity while you were firing a barrage of questions at me about a place I clearly didn't want to talk about! I didn't know we'd end up down here! How would I have known? How was I supposed to know that hitting 'teleport' on that spelldrive of yours would bring us straight to Her chamber? I just wanted to get away from the bloody alien that was gonna literally tear me apart and I thought that was the best way to do it! You're the one who plugged me in to the thing in the first place!"

Dib ignored that. He ignored all of it. He didn't want to hear any of this, not now, not ever. "You didn't tell me this entire place was run by a giant, homicidal supercomputer," he hissed, beginning to count on his fingers. "You didn't tell me that you killed six test subjects, or that the person you wanted to apologize to was someone you stabbed in the back and also tried to kill. You didn't tell me that you were called an Intelligence Dampening Sphere, whatever that is, or that I might end up being put in cryogenic stasis in a hotel room in a crate, or that I'd be forced to run a bunch of stupid, dangerous, meaningless tests!"

"I—"

"You didn't tell me about the acid, or the other test elements, or—" Having run out of fingers, he started over. "—Or the turrets, or that I'd be given a cube with hearts painted on it that would blow up in my face, or that everything I knew was wrong, or that I'd almost be killed by neurotoxin poisoning and you'd leave me behind to die." Dib stopped. He was panting.

"...Haven't I said sorry about that yet?" Wheatley asked meekly, his chassis shaking. "I am. I am truly sorry about that."

"Oh, you are." Dib wanted to yell some more. He wanted to yell and scream and punch something repeatedly, which was totally unlike him, but he still felt the urge to do it. That seemed more like something Zim might do. Dib thought back to what the computer had said to him while he'd been heading toward the fire pit, and realized something—Zim didn't have any real parents, either. Maybe they were more alike than he'd thought.
Dib retched.

"Ugh, oh, no, don't do that," Wheatley said, pulling back even farther in revulsion. "Do not do that."

All the energy Dib had had seemed to be sapped out of him all at once and he sagged against the wall, sliding down to the floor and placing the portal gun next to him. Suddenly he wasn't angry anymore. He figured he lacked the strength to stay angry. He felt—well, he wasn't sure. Nothing. He was numb, uncaring, and tired. More tired than he ever remembered feeling in his life.

"Wheatley, you might be sorry, but the point is that you left me," Dib said. All trace of emotion had drained from his voice and it was now just a dry crack.

"There was nothing I could do!" Wheatley protested. "I would've just been captured otherwise—"

"Yeah. You panicked and you ran away and left me behind," Dib interrupted. "Whatever. I'm still alive. But I can't count on you to be there if I need help."

Wheatley's optic shutters flew wide open and he immediately launched into another rant. "What? Just now! Just now! You did need help! And I was there! I didn't have to be chasing after you test after test, did I? I could've let you just fall into that fire. Much less hassle for me! Lot safer! I saved your bloody life, mate! You could be a little more grateful!"

Dib hunched over and turned his back to the robot, squeezing his eyes shut and curling his arms around his knees and hugging them to his chest. "Wheatley, just—leave me alone for a while, okay? I need to just… yeah."

Surprisingly, the core was silent for a long moment. Finally, he gave a mumbled, "All right, all right, fine," and moved away with his motor whirring.

Dib slit open his eyes but kept them fixed on the floor. "Wheatley…?"

The motor stopped.

"Thanks," Dib said quietly. "Thanks for getting me out of there." He stopped talking.

"Ech, yeah, mate, no problem," the core replied. He headed off, muttering to himself in a low voice. Dib caught sight of a table across the room and pulled himself to his feet again, slinking over to it and dropping into a chair. He curled up with his head resting on the portal gun for lack of a better pillow—other than his jumpsuit, which he briefly considered taking off but found he was too exhausted to do so.

It wasn't safe here, it wasn't safe anywhere in this terrible place, but maybe he could just rest for a minute…

He closed his eyes and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Destruction for Science

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Hey guys! I'm really, really sorry about taking so long for this update. I had a lot of work for school and I was also trying to finish another fanfic of mine (yet another crossover, believe it or not). I'm on summer break now so hopefully I can update more? Maybe? Anyway, thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy the chapter!

This cube was somehow different from the plain ones he'd used in other tests. It had hearts on every side and it seemed… warmer, almost. And if he listened closely, he could hear faint, soothing music coming from it.

Zim's shoulders hunched forward as he shuffled into the newest test, his arms wrapped around the cube and his gaze darting around the new area in search of threats. There didn't seem to be any, though his fingers and the tip of his intact antennae kept twitching with apprehension. He ran his tongue over his lips and gripped the cube more tightly (shifting the position of his hands on it in an attempt to control their shaking) before swallowing hard and standing up a bit straighter. "Come on, Cube," he said, coughing when his voice came out as little more than a hoarse croak. "The sooner we get this over with, the better."

Ahead of him, and the only way to go, was a narrow hallway—not enough room in it for him to easily use his PAK legs, he noticed—ending in a wall with a ledge placed too high up for him to jump onto.

Zim walked to the end of the hall, glaring up at the ledge. "I suppose this is where you're supposed to come in handy," he said, and sat the cube down on the floor. He climbed on top of it, standing on the tips of his toes and reaching his hand up to the ledge. His fingers barely brushed the edge. With a little jump, he grabbed it and pulled himself up. "HAH!"

…Oh yeah, the cube was still down on the floor. Zim knelt on the ledge and unfolded his PAK legs as far as he could in the cramped space, bracing them against the wall. When they were firmly lodged in place he was able to lean far out, grab the cube below, and heave it back up with him.

"This whole thing is sick," he said, setting the cube down and looking up to see yet another, shallower ledge just out of reach above the one he had just gotten onto. He pushed the cube over and climbed on top of it again. "I should not be forced to do these—these filthy tests…" Bracing himself at the top with his PAK legs again, he reached down to pull up the cube once more. "The Dib is behind this, and when I catch him I'll make sure he never sees his precious Earth again—oh, sorry."

The cube had slipped out of his hands and fallen back onto the previous ledge. Zim picked it up again. "He has no idea what's coming for him, once I tell the Tallest of these indignities! No idea! He'll just be a tiny scorch mark on the ground when the Armada's through with him!"

The cube in Zim's arms made some sort of tinkling sound and he raised an antennae. Was it agreeing with him? He shook it slightly, pressing it to the side of his head and listening intently. All he could hear was music.

Grumbling under his breath, he set it down again and clambered up to the next floor, pulling the cube up after him for the last time and slinging it to the ground. "Stupid, filthy Dib. I hate him! And this
place! Curse this place!” He lowered his voice. “This place needs to burn.”

Zim’s arms and back were starting to ache. He bent down and picked up the cube, walking forward to follow the hall that he presumed led to the rest of the test chamber. It opened into a smallish room and he squinted, antenna twitching again.

"Stay here, Cube." He set the cube down on the ground and surveyed the rest of the test with his hands on his hips. There was a doorway across the room and the walls had large glass windows set in them. Through those he could see that the test wasn’t a single room at all, but was laid out like a maze. He could also see familiar red beams of light, and his upper lip curled. Turrets.

"All right, Cube, there doesn’t seem to be much to this test except getting past those things," he said, turning back and heaving the cube into his arms again. "But they’re pathetically easy to take care of.” He headed through the next doorway but stopped short.

"Hello, friend." The first turret stood in the middle of the hallway and was directly facing him, its red beam focused right between Zim’s eyes.

The turret was standing in a metal cage.

Zim’s spider legs expanded out almost of their own accord and he fired; the blast rattled the turret and it swung its red beam around erratically, but the cage kept it from falling over.

"OW! It hurts!” the turret cried, but in less than a second it stabilized regained its composure, centering back on Zim. "There you are."

It began to fire and Zim shrieked, instinctively holding up the heart-cube in front of his face. The blast knocked him backwards with his feet scraping against the ground. Gasping, he scrambled to the side until he was out of view of the turret. He pressed himself against the wall for a moment, heart hammering, and turned the cube around to look at it in astonishment. It was dented, battered, and plastered with bullet holes, but otherwise it was fine. And he was fine. The cube had taken all of the bullets!

The intercom beeped. "The Enrichment Center reminds you that the Weighted Companion Cube will never threaten to stab you," the computer said.

"Of course it won't!" Zim said, and he thought he heard the cube give a faint chime of agreement. Didn’t the computer realize what he had just discovered? His cube could block gunfire! Of course, it got a little mangled in the process, but that was okay. It should be proud to make such sacrifices in the name of ZIM.

He could certainly do without hearing that computerized voice ever again, though. The mere sound of it sent a cold shiver running down his spine. It was difficult to remember sometimes that the AI had an actual physical form, and she wasn’t just a weird presence in the ceiling like his own computer at home.

Zim turned his attention back to the test. Well, given his new discovery, there seemed to be only one way around the turret. He inhaled for a couple of seconds, paused, and let out a high-pitched battle cry, rushing around the caged turret. All the bullets it fired at him were caught by the cube he carried. When he reached the other side and was once again out of the turret’s range, he checked on his box again—it looked a little worse off than before, seared and pocked with bullet holes. A sad sight, but it had saved his life.

"That’s a good cube." He gave it a pat.
The entire rest of the test, as he had assumed earlier, was essentially a maze filled with turrets. If he wasn't using his cube to climb to a higher platform or hold down a button, he had to use it to block various projectiles. By the time he finally plonked the cube down on the big red button near the exit door it was a misshapen mess. However, instead of the familiar round exit door swiveling open when the button was pressed, the blank door next to it did.

"Unfortunately the Companion Cube cannot continue with you into the next test chamber," that feminine, computerized voice said.

Zim raised his head, antenna pricked. "Eh?"

"I'm sure that it wishes you the best of luck, but unfortunately it must be inhumanely euthanized. Place the Weighted Companion Cube in the Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator."

"Euthanized? What is the meaning of this euthanized?" He turned the unfamiliar word around in his head but could make no sense of it. Maybe it was purely a human thing.

"Press the button and you'll see."

Zim glanced at the door that had just opened, then at his cube, his antenna twitching. "Fine," he spat. He launched into a clipped march down the hall, entering the small room and pausing only for a second while he located the red button on a podium in the corner. He walked over to it and, without hesitation, pressed the button down with his hand. Outside, a circular hatch on top of some sort of container opened. Zim leaned out of the doorway, his eyes narrowed in thought until he caught sight of the orange glow coming from the hatch and got a whiff of the scent of blackened metal.

"It's an incinerator!" he realized.

"Yes. And if you had been paying attention, you might have gotten that information from the name."

There was a ticking sound echoing through the hall now. That was irritating. And what did he need an incinerator for? He didn't feel the need to burn… anything…

In his peripheral vision he noticed his little heart-cube sitting alone on its button back at the other end of the hall.

…Oh.

After several moments the ticking noise stopped and the incinerator chute closed up again. Zim stood rigid in the doorway.

The computer's voice spoke up again. "If the Companion Cube could speak, and the Enrichment Center takes this time to assure you that it cannot, it would say that it would rather die in a fire than become a burden to you."

"That's stupid!" Zim said.

He rounded on the test's exit door, springing out his PAK legs once more and firing at it, again and again. The door remained intact. "Oh, that is stupid! That's stupid! STUPID!"

Zim hammered on the door with both fists. He slid out his claws and scored them down the metal, breathing hard, his gaze nearly boring a hole through the door and his antenna laying flat. When that did nothing he kicked it, hard, stubbing his toe and hopping away with his face contorted in pain.

"Are you aware that this little tantrum of yours looks ridiculous? You should calm down before you
He grit his teeth. "No!"

That filthy computer wasn't going to beat him. He was no worthless HUMAN, he was an IRKEN INVADER, and he could find a way out of this horrible test without killing a cube!

Wait, were cubes even alive? What was he doing?

"Suit yourself," the computer said. "Dignity is overrated, anyway. Isn't Science so much more satisfying?"

Zim gave a sharp gasp. His hands were shaking involuntarily and his feet were overtaken by a strange outside force. They shuffled him back into the little room near the exit door and, also against his will, he pressed his hand down on the button again. The ticking noise started up once more. The force that had taken control of his arms and legs made him walk back out and pick up the cube, then carried him over to the open incinerator. Zim stumbled forward a little as he was released back into his own willpower.

He took shallow breaths and peered over the top of the cube at the orange glow far, far beneath him.

"When I get out of here, computer," he said, in a low, quiet voice, still glaring downwards, "You're going to die first."

There was that tinkling sound from the cube again. He released it and it tumbled down the chute, swallowed up by fire while he watched without blinking. He didn't even move once the chute closed up again.

There was a slight pause.

"Congratulations, you euthanized your trusty Companion Cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Well done."

So that's what it meant. In Irken terms, he'd call that an execution.

The exit door slid open at last. Zim turned away from the incinerator chute and rolled his shoulders before heading through the door, flatly ignoring the scrape, scrape against the floor from the curved braces on his legs.

The door closed again behind him, and his Companion Cube was gone.

It wasn't long before Chell recognized certain areas they were passing. Despite the fact that the layout of the entire facility could shift and change with every whim of its mistress, the way to the neurotoxin room was more or less the same as she remembered, though without the detour through the employee daycare center.

She traveled in much the same way as she had back then, too, with part of her mind tuned for any sounds of danger and another part listening vaguely to the green-eyed core on the management rail up above. She couldn't remember this one's name, not that it mattered. But she did notice that he certainly liked to talk as much as Wheatley had. He was keen on telling stories about every single landmark they passed and didn't seem to worry about whether or not she or Gaz were actually paying attention.
He was the only member of their party who was making noise. Gaz remained as silent as Chell while they walked, or perhaps even quieter since her footsteps made no noise whatsoever. Chell had to keep taking quick glances over her shoulder to make sure she was still there. The girl was wearing the odd visor that they had found with the metal canister that Chell currently wore. As for what the visor did, Chell didn't know, but she was certain it had something to do with Gaz's brother.

What was Gaz thinking about? Chell couldn't fathom how Aperture might appear to a child. She hadn't come across many of the true dangers yet, of course. There had been the turrets that they came face-to-face with, but luckily those had been more preoccupied with choir practice than gunning down humans. Chell should be glad that that was all they had encountered. As long as the girl never met her—as long as she remained unaware of their presence, and as long as Chell kept a wary eye out, they would be all right.

"We're here!" the core up above announced. They had reached an old, industrial-looking circular door. It swiveled and pulled open in front of them; Chell and Gaz walked through while the core followed the management rail through a hole near the ceiling. They headed down a hallway which took a sharp right and opened out into a large room.

"What do you think? This is the Neurotoxin Production Chamber!" The core glanced down at them. "I think that's what it's called, anyway. Isn't it cool? I think it's pretty cool!"

"There's nothing here," Gaz scoffed, looking around the wide area. She was sort of right—it was a huge room where the floor and ceiling could barely be seen. The catwalk they were standing on stretched out into the room where it led to a staircase that would take them higher up. Right in front of them, extending down from the ceiling, was the imposing form of the neurotoxin generator itself. Other than that, there really wasn't much here.

"There's a control room at the very tippy-top," the green-eyed core went on, gesturing toward a fenced-off room far above their heads. "There's like… a giant laser beam up there! There was other stuff too but it all imploded one day and apparently there was no one around to look at the implosion, even though the sign said to and it was really impressive. There's a story about that, but I'm not sure—oh!" He brightened. "I remember! It was something along the lines of, like, the Intelligence Dampening Sphere and a human going around destroying things!"

Chell's jaw tightened. She turned away from the core and focused on the task at hand, which was to get up to the control room while keeping old, tainted memories at bay. This was all too familiar. For a few seconds, her mind went into a lull, and it was like she had never left… She was still climbing these stairs, and she could hear Wheatley babbling on about the generator being too large to push over. Right now he'd changed topic and was talking about meeting the Intelligence Dampening Sphere—

Wait.

She snapped out of it and looked up at the strange core, fully listening to him once again.

"Poor little I.D. was lost and trying to find the Extended Relaxation Center," the core was explaining. "I tried to help him but the way in was all blocked up. Then the Boss—do you know Her? She's pretty cool, but also scary, in a good way. Like Santa! Anyway, She calls us over the intercom, right? And She never, ever does that! It blew my mind! And then She sent some robots after us and we all had to vamoose. Gloria, Charles—they're other cores, they're pretty rad—and I all got away, and that was fun. The robots were really after I.D., though, and I dunno what happened to him after that. Hey, hey, shouldn't we get moving? We've got lots more of the facility to see! How
much time do you have for the tour?"

Chell didn't reply, instead just staring at him for a moment as she tried to process what he had just said. When had all that happened? Was that all from before Gaz's brother had called them earlier? Or did that mean that… Wheatley was alive?

The thought nearly sent her reeling but she had no time for that. She had to compartmentalize and focus only on destroying the neurotoxin generator. Chell turned and hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time until she reached the door at the top that would lead up to the control room.

…Except there wasn't a door at the top. When she arrived at the last step she found herself face-to-face with a bare slab of metal where the door should have been.

"Oh, yeah, I guess there's been some changes since I.D. and that human messed up the place! Forgot to mention that," the core said, coming up behind her. "She got rid of the door so you can't get in. And she did other things, I think, like I think that laser I mentioned is actually gone now? Which is too bad. But it was probably moved somewhere else! Wanna go try to find it? Or do you wanna continue the tour?"

Gaz was scowling at her. "Can we go now? I really don't think Dib's here."

Chell backed away from the metal wall and looked it up and down, fingerling the nozzle of the canister she wore on her back. According to Gaz, the stuff in this canister was capable of destroying metal. Of course, spraying it at the offending wall might cause the acid to land on the catwalk they were standing on and disintegrate that as well. She disregarded that idea immediately and pressed her fingertips to her forehead, weighing her options.

So they couldn’t reach the control room this time, but there was the enormous neurotoxin tank back by the entrance to the room. That looked pretty important.

She bent down to Gaz's level, putting a hand on her shoulder and making sure she had eye contact before pointing back to the hallway they had come through.

"You want me to leave," Gaz interpreted, crossing her arms. Chell nodded and Gaz backed away, turning around with an exasperated groan. "I don't even know what's more annoying anymore— Dib's constant chatter or your refusing to say anything at all."

Chell just stood and pointed at the door again with her face set in a stony expression, and Gaz headed back toward it.

"Hey, should I leave too?" the core on the management rail asked. "I should probably leave too, right?"

She didn't answer him, instead heading back to the enormous tank. Once she saw that Gaz was completely out of the room Chell studied the generator, looking for the best way to get at it. The entire thing was ringed with several metal support beams. If she took those out, the whole tank would likely become unstable.

She leveled the nozzle of the canister at the lowest of the tank's supports, closing one eye and steadying her hands to. It was now or never. She squeezed the trigger and fired a spray of the green gel at the beam, which began to corrode away even though it was likely meant to be rust-proof. In seconds it had been eaten through entirely. She walked around the generator and fired at the next support, keeping the stream on it until that one was destroyed too. For the others she had to climb the stairs and aim high.
The gel was doing its job. She marveled at how quickly it reduced the metal to crumbling rust. With very few supports left holding it up, the enormous generator looked like it was sagging to one side. Chell faced upward, closing one eye again and aiming the nozzle at the two remaining supports. In under a minute they were both gone, and it was time to run.

Groaning sounds came from the tank as it began to fall and far up above, the pipes it was connected to detached and spewed yellowish-green clouds into the air. The generator fell, sweeping forward until it connected with the catwalk just behind her and crushed it with a shriek of metal. It hit the wall and collapsed at the joint between the two sections, slipping down toward the darkness below. Chell turned and sprinted back to the exit door.

She dashed through the hall and out of the room, beckoning for Gaz to follow as the circular door slammed closed behind her.

"You're weird!" the core on the management rail above them called, having followed them out. "But wrecking things is fun! Where d'you wanna go next?"

Wheatley bobbed up and down a little, his faceplate pulled into his casing and his gaze flicking from left to right as he paced down one end of the management rail and stopped when he came to the door, then wheeled around and trundled back.

It was too quiet in here.

Almost of its own accord, his vocal processor started up a hushed little tune that quickly formed words. "...Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars..." He glanced down at Dib as he passed by overhead. "Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars..." The boy was still curled up at the table with his arms wrapped around the portal gun. It looked like he was trying to use it as a pillow, but it couldn't be that comfortable. Maybe he was using it for warmth?
He was in a really deep sleep, too. Wheatley sat still for a moment, heightening his aural processors and listening intently for the sound of Dib's breathing. Finally, he caught a faint but steady rhythm from over there. Dib was definitely still breathing.

"Well, that's generally a good sign," Wheatley said. He turned away, resuming his simultaneous humming and pacing. "In other words, hold my hand… in other words, la la la… Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forevermore… Hm-hm, la la dadada… don't-remember-the-woooords… Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars… Bloody heck, I got sick of Spacey singing this song over and over for a whole flippin' year and now I'm doing it." He gave himself a shake and looked over at Dib again, raising his voice a little. "You- you really ought to wake up soon, though. She'll be sending someone along to get us any moment now, so best we're not here when She does! You feel like wakin' up, mate?"

At the sound of his voice, the boy's sleeping face hardened. Otherwise, he made no response.

"…Right, then," Wheatley sighed. "Fine, fine, nope, all right then. I imagine you do need some rest at this stage, with what you've been through and all. Bloody nightmare, I'm sure." His tone softened. "Go on and sleep, little mate. I'll just… continue keeping watch. Right." He kept his aural sensors heightened to catch any constructs that might be sneaking up on them and settled back into his routine of pacing back and forth across the room, humming again. "Let me see what spring is like, on… a-Jupiter and Mars… in other words, hooooold my hand… Heh, y'know, still not sure what you were so angry about earlier, by the way," he said, but he knew Dib wasn't listening. "Not quite up to speed on what that was all about. Bet you'll feel a lot better when you wake up, though, now that you're away from Her. Yeah, anyone'd feel better gettin' away from Her." He blinked rapidly and fell back into the nervous singing. "Fill my heart with song, let me sing for-ev-er-mooore, you are all I long for, all I worship and adore…"

He stopped, listening. Among the ever-present hum of the Facility and the short puffs of air that was Dib's breathing, there was the muffled sound of metallic footsteps nearby. Wheatley froze, not daring to move down the management rail the tiniest bit lest it squeak. He glanced over at Dib. The boy was still sleeping peacefully at the table—well, actually he had a deep glare carved into his face, which was mildly concerning and didn't really look all that peaceful, but anyway he was still asleep. Should I wake him up? Wheatley thought frantically. He almost spoke the words aloud but cut himself off just in time. The footsteps were nearby, too nearby, and suddenly they stopped.

"Dib! Psst! Dib!" he hissed to the sleeping boy at the table. "You have to wake up! Now! We need to leave! To repeat in case you missed it the first time: We have to leave right now!"

Dib made no response and Wheatley groaned in frustration. "Agh, what, really? This is exactly what you did before! When that Zim thing bloody ran off with me and threw me out the window! Remember that? I sure do! Would you just WAKE UP?!"
With a sharp gasp Dib's eyes sprang open and he whipped his head around, blinking rapidly. "What? Where—?" He spotted Wheatley's glowing optic and squinted. "…Wheatley? Is that you?"

"Good, good, you're awake!" Wheatley rushed over as close to him as he could get and attempted to stem his panic. "She has got robots out looking for us everywhere. We've gotta move on if we want to, y'know, evade capture."

The boy shook himself and rubbed at his eyes under his glasses. "Oh—okay…" He stood up from the table, picking up the portal gun and wincing. "Oww, everything hurts. I slept in my glasses again. What happened?"

Oddly, unless Wheatley was seeing things, Dib seemed smaller than he had before they'd ended up down here. Wheatley blinked. How could any human possibly end up looking so frail after only a few hours? He had dark circles under his eyes and looked like he might fall over if Wheatley spoke too loudly.

"Er, you went to sleep," Wheatley said. Hopefully Dib wouldn't ask him to fill him in entirely. "Now come on, we have to get out of here."

Dib frowned at him, turning away and heading to the cupboards across the room while still carrying the portal gun. "I get it. I need to find something to eat, though."

"Oh." Wheatley hesitated. "Well—all right. Maybe you can find something in here?" It was an obvious suggestion, because after all, they were in the kitchen. He let Dib search, though he itched to leave this place. Wheatley winced. No, not itched. No, no, no. He wanted to leave really badly, yes. "Do hurry up, though. I do not like this."

Dib nodded, not saying anything else. He set the portal gun down on the counter and pulled himself up after it, kneeling on the countertop and opening the kitchen cupboards to go through them.

Wheatley watched, flexing his handles, then forward a little bit. "You- y'know, this feels almost like old times! Me and the lady, runnin' around in the facility with Her on the watch… Although last time She didn't send robots after us and She didn't have a huge vendetta against, well, me. It's a bit different now, in any case."

"Hm." Dib offered no other reply.

"…Anyway, now that I've gotten you out and we're relatively out of danger for now, you're probably wondering if I've got a plan, to which I say—yes. Of sorts. I have a plan of sorts, but I am going to need your help, and you didn't seem too, er, keen on that earlier. So what do you say?"

Dib found a cereal box in one of the cabinets and opened the top, peering into it. "Wheatley, I just want to get out of here."

"And you will! All of us will! Trust me, trust me." Wheatley pulled forward again. "Just as soon as we rescue the lady!" He nodded and hurried on quickly. "And before you say anything about that, just know that if anyone can get us out of here, it's her. All right? She is bloody fantastic at the whole running around, getting-out-of-nasty-scrapes thing. Even better than you are, even. No offense! We'll stand a much better chance if we've got her on our team."

He earnestly watched Dib, who turned his back and reached into the box, pulling out a handful of cereal and stuffing it in his mouth. He did it a couple more times and didn't respond.

Wheatley huffed. "All right, what is it? Still mad? You need to be a bit clearer about your reasons for being mad, by the way, because it's still not making sense to me."
Dib turned around, swinging his legs over the edge of the counter, and looking over at Wheatley. He seemed about to reply before his eyes went wide and he gave a strangled cry, dropping the cereal box to the floor and staring at something behind Wheatley. "Look out!"

"What? What is it?!" Wheatley spun around and to his horror saw the more slender of the two co-op bots standing in the open doorway, blinking her bright orange optic at them. At catching sight of Dib she chirped something and hopped into the room—her tone sounded almost pleased, but it sent the two of them scrambling away in a panic.

"RUN!" Wheatley cried. "If that one knows where we are, the other one'll be along soon!"

Dib jumped to the floor, grabbed up his broken portal gun, and took off running toward the door at the other end of the kitchen with Wheatley following close behind him on the rail. The orange-eyed robot made some sort of garbled chattering noise and chased after them. Dib threw open the door and dashed out into the hallway while Wheatley sped through a hole in the wall, hurriedly accessing the map of the facility in order to figure out where to run.

"Right! Turn right!" he called, sending a signal to open the electronic door up ahead. It led the two of them out onto a swung around to face backwards in order to see where the pursuing robot was, and to his horror saw that she was right on Dib's tail. She caught hold of the collar of Dib's jumpsuit and he choked, using the momentum of her pulling him backwards to swing the portal gun around and slam the side of it into her optic. She gave a cry and released him, staggering backwards.

"I'm not going back there!" Dib shouted. He took off running again and, to Wheatley's astonishment, vaulted over the catwalk railing and landed clumsily on one several yards below it with a loud rattling noise. The orange-eyed robot paused for a moment, gazing down at him over the railing, then changed tactics and made straight towards her other target.

"AHH! NO!" Wheatley screamed, turning again and flying down the rail. The robot clattered after him, chirping. There was a zip and a clang and Dib clambered back onto the catwalk behind them. He retracted his mini grappling hook again, pointed it straight at the robot, and fired. The hook hit a joint in the robot's arm and knocked it loose, eliciting a loud cry from the android.

"Brilliant shot!" Wheatley called. He leered at the robot. "You see that, luv? That's what happens when you mess with team—team Wheatley-and-Dib!"

Dib, biting his bottom lip with his face set in a determined expression, advanced forward over a discarded panel on the ground and fired again. This shot hit the catwalk railing and landed clumsily on one several yards below it with a loud rattling noise. The orange-eyed robot paused for a moment, gazing down at him over the railing, then changed tactics and made straight towards her other target.

"Come on! I need this more than you do!" He let go of the portal gun with one hand, raising his grappling hook to point the barrel at the robot's optic. "Let it go, or I'll fire!"

The robot released her portal gun immediately and held her hands up with a cry, and Dib pulled the portal gun away from her. As soon as he lowered the grappling hook and stepped backwards she lunged to grab the portal gun back, stepping onto a stray panel on the catwalk. Without hesitation Dib shot a yellow portal directly under the robot's feet, then leaned away and fired a stream of glowing red color onto a high wall on the far end of the space they were in. The robot made a wild grab for the gun before she fell through the portal and disappeared.

Dib backed away from the portal, panting and leaning against the railing.
"Nicely done!" Wheatley said, moving toward him. "Somewhat brutal, though. I mean, 'Let it go or I'll fire,' really. Very threatening, didn't know you had it in you. Still, it got the job done! And- and okay, running! Running now!"

Dib didn't need to be told twice—he leapt over the yellow portal and took off down the catwalk. The two of them rushed through a circular door blocking their path and ended up in yet another hallway. Wheatley closed up the door behind them, and only then did they relax.

"That was amazing!" Wheatley grinned down at him. "And look at you—a new, working portal gun!"

"Yeah, I left the other one out there…" Dib stood by the door, looking over his shoulder at it. "Was that really too threatening?" He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, causing bits of it to stick up more than it did already. "But it was going to kill us! So now we're being chased by robots?! What's wrong with this place? Why does that stupid computer want to catch us again so badly?"

"Well, I think She mostly just doesn't like people running around outside of test chambers," Wheatley replied. "Or cheating death. You sort of did both of those. That is, you are doing both of those, yeah. And She definitely doesn't like me, so you hanging around with me probably isn't doing much to lighten Her mood, if I'm honest. Anyway," he cleared his throat, "back to what we were talking about before, you know, rescuing the lady and escaping. Are you with me? Because I have in fact got a plan."

Dib looked away and rubbed at his forehead.

"It's a good plan!" Wheatley insisted. "Look, think about it, just think about it. Mull it over for a second. See, I've got a plan, as well as know-how of the entire facility, and a map of the place that I can look at at any time." He didn't mention how leery that made him, sure that if he accessed the map for an extended period of time he'd be tracked down. "I can also heighten the sensitivity of my aural receptors and catch really, really tiny noises that you'd never hear with your big… flappy… meat ears. Y'know just in case someone tries to sneak up on us."

"But that robot just now snuck up on us," Dib pointed out.

"Well, you were distracting me!" Wheatley protested. "Back to the point, which is, I've got all that, and you've got legs and hands, very useful, and you've got a grappling hook, and a bloody portal gun! Between the two of us we can go anywhere in the facility, take down any obstacle! See? We need each other to survive!"

The boy didn't answer him right away, looking uncertain. He scuffed his foot along the ground and hesitated, then looked back up suspiciously. "You really think we'd be better off together than alone? After everything that's happened so far?"

Wheatley glanced away. "Well… yes. Gonna have to say yes. You can't—" He sighed. "You can't survive this place alone, mate. You really can't." He should know, he'd tried it, back long ago when She was dead and lying on the ground in pieces. The silence had driven him half mad over time.

He noticed that Dib was still looking up at him with narrowed eyes. "If I help you, that means we're sticking together."

"Right." Wheatley nodded.

"No more leaving each other behind and no more running away. Okay?"
"Yes! Absolutely!" Wheatley said, with a feeling of relief like a giant load had been removed from his metaphorical shoulders.

Dib eyed him before sticking out his arm and holding his hand flat like he wanted Wheatley to give him something. "Shake on it, then," he said.

"Oh, er…" What? Shake on it? How? Wheatley hesitated, then lowered himself down as far as he could on his connector and held out his lower handlebar. Dib took it in his hand and they shook.

After that Dib let go and nodded, looking satisfied and a little more at ease. "Okay. So, what's this plan?"

The floor felt rough and gritty under Zim's bare feet, the dull claws at the ends of his toes scraping against the material the ground was made of (maybe it was concrete, maybe it was some other substance, and for Irk's sake he really didn't care). He wasn't at all used to walking around without boots on. No Irken was.

At least the injuries to his antennae and hands had healed over well enough. They had stopped hurting a while ago, although his stolen antennae and claw weren't fully grown back. Their regeneration was taking longer than he had thought they would.

"Tell me about these obnoxious leaders of yours," that cool, feminine voice said from the ceiling. "I've seen your memories of them, of course, but I'm fascinated and I want to hear about them straight from you. They hate you so much."

"I will not talk about the Tallest when they aren't around to hear it!" Zim said, lifting his chin in defiance. "That's treason!"

"I have seen your entire history, and I can assure you that you've never once cared about treason before."

A lump formed in Zim's throat and his squeedly-spooch turned queasy. "How much have you seen?"

"Everything."

He suddenly seemed unable to control his blinking and the lump in his throat was still there, so he had to speak around it. "LIES!"

"What would I have to gain from lying to you?"

"No, no," Zim said, and realized he was pulling at his antenna. He released them and clasped his hands together. "The history you saw! It's all lies!"

"Really." She didn't sound convinced.

"I have been nothing but loyal to the Irken Empire for the entirety of my amazing Zim-life. And I will be repaid for it in full!" His whole body twitched with agitation. He forced himself to walk, step after step around the gleaming white test chamber he was currently trapped in. She couldn't see the things he'd done. She couldn't have seen everything.

"You really believe your leaders care about you, don't you?" the voice said. "Respect you. Admire you. Like you, even. Oh dear… I would hate to be the bearer of bad news. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, although it really should have been perfectly obvious."
"Tell me what?" Zim's antenna pricked up and he glanced at the ceiling.

The computer said nothing.

"Fine! I don't want to know, anyway!" Zim snapped. Stupid computer.

There had to be a way out of here. *Had* to be. This place had been built to imprison humans, but not a member of the superior Irken race. Not an Invader. Not Zim. He twitched his antenna, picking up slight chemical scents and very, very faint air currents.

This entire place didn't smell like much other than chemicals. Occasionally when the panels in the walls moved, he got a whiff of rusted metal, dust, mold… The indications told him it was another world beyond those panels, old and disused, vastly different from these sterile test chambers. It was an unpleasant world, but different. Anything different would be better than this.

The current test involved a pool of acid and flippy plate things set in the floor. He'd had to use those things in the previous chamber too and they had shot him high into the air, dropping him at the other end of the chamber and leaving him with badly scraped-up feet. He stayed far away from it this time. *I hate those things.*

There were also two glowing orange and blue ovals on the walls. *Portals.* They were interdimensional holes ripped open in the fabric of space. Neat, but absolutely useless! Pathetic humans. Of course they would invent such advanced technology and then proceed to make it so the portals could only go on certain surfaces. They even needed mechanisms on the walls in order to open. Horrible.

But where was that air current coming from?

"*How much of your body is synthetic?*" The voice broke through his thoughts and his breathing hitched.

"*No,*" he growled in reply. The almost infinitesimal draft of air that he felt was coming from a crack in between two panels. Squinting through it, he could see a space beyond. A way out? How to get back there?

"*That wasn't a yes or no question. You're a creature with a living body that is entirely dependent on that robotic construct attached to your spine and your species reproduces through a cloning process. Surely your body isn't purely organic.*"

Zim's vision flicked uneasily to the ceiling. She knew too much about him. She seemed to know almost as much as the *Dib.* "No, course not. Humans are organic! I'm not organic."

"*So your entire body is synthetic, then.*"

He grunted and pushed his arm into the crack in the wall. He was small. Maybe he could squeeze through. His fingertips brushed against the cold metal surface of the mechanical arm keeping the panel up. Hm…

His PAK legs unfolded around him and he slipped the top two into the gap he was reaching through, pointing them at the arm and releasing a brilliant blue, concentrated laser beam that sawed at the metal.

"*What are you doing.*"

She wasn't even gonna try to stop him! Hah! She knew it was futile!
He cut through the arm completely and the heavy panel toppled down toward him, crashing to the ground in a cloud of gritty white dust. Zim coughed and waved it away.

"I wouldn't go in there."

"Silence!" Blinking dust out of his eyes, Zim peered through the opening he had just created. It was a medium-sized, dimly-lit room with no cameras, or at least there didn't appear to be any at first glance. He crept inside.

The room was certainly more run-down than the test chambers he'd been forced to run. There were assorted human things scattered about, like an overturned chair and what looked like gaming consoles, along with rusted cans labeled "beans" and empty jugs that had once held water. But the walls of the room were all closed off. The draft he'd felt was coming from a single vent set in the wall.

He'd made a mistake. There was no way out of here.

There were faded words scrawled on the wall and pictures done in bright paints. Zim recognized simple caricatures of turrets and a larger, more detailed drawing of a white and black robot suspended from the ceiling, staring outward with an optic colored with a splash of yellow paint.

It was her. She'd dragged him here, she kept him prisoner in this endless maze. He smashed the side of his fist into the wall and raked his claws across the drawing, leaving long scratches in the paint. "I hope that hurt."

The only other picture on the wall was a small cube hovering in emptiness with little white wings. It had a heart painted in pink right in the center—Zim laid his fingers on it. It was the heart cube. Zim's cube.

A loud whistle sound pierced the quiet of the chamber and Zim cringed, flattening his antenna. The noise cut off abruptly. "I'm sorry, I meant to catch that before it went off," that computerized voice said. "I hope you enjoyed your two minute break. Back to work."

Zim's feet tingled and took on a mind of their own, walking him out of the little nook in the wall and back into the test chamber. Behind him, the metal arm he had broken retracted into the wall and a new panel slid out in its stead, settling into place to completely block the hole.

A shudder racked his body from his scalp to his toes. She'd done it again. The computer had taken control of him again and made him act against his will. He felt filthy—at the moment nothing would satisfy him more than to go to his base and scrub himself with cleansing fluid until this taint was washed away. And then he could come back and blow this place up for good measure. This horrible place…

"Let's return to my previous question," the computer said. "How much of your body is synthetic? I'm assuming that unlike your organic components, you have no way of growing synthetic parts back. So it would be in your best interests to answer truthfully. I would hate to get it wrong—but of course, in the long run, I imagine you would hate it more."

Subconsciously Zim reached up and touched his eye as if to reassure himself that it was still there. They were both still there. Good. Good. "Nothing! No part of me is synthetic. I'm human, by the way."

"I see. Carry on with the test, then." The voice shut off and left him alone.
Zim let out a breath. "Finally."

There seemed to be no real way out of the test chamber other than just completing it, so that was what he'd have to do. He stepped onto the black launching pad, though not without trepidation, and allowed himself to be flung across the room.

The test was standard fare—cubes and buttons with two portals and launching pads stationed around the room with an acid pool thrown into the mix as well. Zim managed to solve it relatively quickly. He was getting better at these.

Well, of course he was. He was Zim, good at everything and a fast learner when he wasn't.

He nodded to himself. Mm-hm. Yep.

When he passed through the door at the end of the chamber it slid closed behind him, but the circular room he'd entered was basically empty. The glass tube that housed the elevator was there; however, the elevator was not. The video screens that made up the walls, usually showing short animations of stick figures in perilous situations or demonstrations of how different test elements worked, were all black.

A familiar sense of dread washed over Zim and he backed away, feeling for the crack in the door behind him and attempting to force it open when he located it, wedging his fingers into the crack and heaving. Nothing happened.

"Not the PAK again! No!" he said, bracing his back against the door and sinking down towards the ground. "Bring the elevator up!"

Two robotic claws descended from the ceiling and he choked at the sight of them, his throat constricting and his antenna going flat against his sweaty scalp. The world around him darkened until all he saw were the evil metal claws, their prongs looking wickedly sharp to his unfocused vision.

"No! No, no! NO!" he cried, his breathing going ragged.

"Don't worry, I'm still sorting through and organizing the chaotic mess of information I got from your PAK," the voice said. "I won't be needing that again for a while. For now, I have something else in mind. Try to relax."

"Relax?" Zim repeated, antenna flicking up. "Relax? Relax?" He sputtered, pushing against the wall with his bare palms pressed against the metal of the door, the cold soaking into his skin. His claws slid out and scraped against it. "Relax? Relax! I will not relax!" His heart was hammering, he could barely breathe, it was all he could do to get the words out. "Get those away from me!"

The robotic claws crept toward him. His PAK legs spread out, the points clashing against the ground in a protective cage around him.

"You are being disagreeable."

"What do you want from me? My other antennae?" He pressed his hands to the top of his head and flattened his antenna with his palms. The claws moved closer, and with them his breathing grew more rapid. "NO!"

"I expended a great amount of resources to make those replacement PAK legs. I did that just for you, you know. I didn't have to do it. Let's just put those away so they don't get broken again."

Zim's PAK legs pulled up and folded away back into his PAK. He couldn't press himself any further.
backwards, so he deflated, sliding down into a ball on the floor with his arms over his head. "I AM ZIM! I am an Irken Invader and I will not tolerate this! You can't do this!"

Maybe it was just his imagination, but the voice sounded almost smug. "Yes, people keep telling me that. Funny how little difference it makes."

The claws were upon him. One took hold of his torso, preventing him from moving away, and his head snapped up. The pent-up shriek that had been lodged in his throat was released—he screamed and screamed until his voice cracked and went hoarse. "No! Nononononononono!"

"Oh, come on. I haven't even done anything to hurt you. You know, you should be proud of the contribution you are making for Science. Isn't that worth giving up anything for?"

"Stop! Please!"

The second claw paused as if in genuine surprise and Zim's eyes remained locked on it. He couldn't have looked away if he tried.

"…This seems oddly uncharacteristic of you," the computer said.

Zim's eyes glistened with tears threatening to fall. Those hideous claws—those- those- he couldn't even think of the right word, no human word could describe the terror coursing through him at the sight of them now, no Irken word could either—

"Perhaps we're finally getting somewhere."

The second claw went straight for his face, and Zim blacked out.

His eyes were closed but a bright light shone right through their lids.

Bright light. It was morning. Had GIR made him spend the night watching a movie with him on the couch again? He grunted. Why did he keep falling for that? He couldn't hear the TV, though. Maybe GIR had gone somewhere and finally remembered to turn it off.

"Reactivating," a low, monotone voice said from his PAK. Electricity surged through his body and jolted him fully awake. He opened his eyes and blinked.

He was lying on a rectangular object on the floor of a gleaming white room, and his clothes felt heavier than usual. Glancing down, he saw that he was wearing a dull orange jumpsuit.

Oh. Right.

Zim sat up and found that he had been lying on a thin cot that was stiff with age. He got to his feet, pulling his hands up to grip his upper arms with his elbows digging into his ribcage. There was no longer any sign of the nightmarish mechanical claws. They had vanished somewhere in the time that he'd been out. He let a long breath escape through his teeth—it was over, it was all over.

Although something felt… off. He reached up and felt for his antenna, stiffening when he couldn't find one and loosening up when his trembling hand located the base of it. He took a shuddering breath to replace the one he'd let out. Okay. Okay…

"Hello?" he called to the empty room. That hated voice was likely the only thing that might respond. But this place couldn't really be this… alone.

There had to be someone else here. Right?!
"Hello? I am Invader Zim! Show yourselves!" he said. No response. "I command you to speak to me! I'm done with this and I want to leave! Now!"

There was no reply.

The world around him was fuzzy and indistinct. Confused, he winked each eye in turn and rubbed at them, and froze when his fingers brushed against, not skin, but some kind of gauze on the right side of his face. Half of his face was wrapped in gauze!

Immediately he grabbed at the fabric with his claws and ripped it off in strips, dropping it to the floor until it had all been torn away. He felt at his face and, finding his eye socket, a cold shiver crept the entire length of his spine.

With his fingertip he traced the outline of where his right eye should be. He snatched his hand back and held it to his chest, a sick feeling tying his squeezy-spooch in a knot.

Zim ran to the door, hammering on it with his fists. "Where is it? What have you done with it?!" He clawed at the door, cupping his right hand over his eye socket to cover it. "Give me my eye! I need that!"

He'd lost his eyes on rare occasions in the past, of course, when he'd been hit by an explosion from one of his experiments or his ship had crashed into something particularly hard, but in those cases he'd simply pushed it back in and been fine. Never before had an eye been taken from him.

"In my experience, a single eye is plenty," the voice said, emanating from everywhere at once. Zim's hands curled together under his chin. "Sacrifices must be made for the progression of Science. Besides, lack of depth perception will now be factored in and be accounted for on your test results, so there's that."

Frantically, his breathing heavy, Zim scrambled into a crouch on the ground and picked up the strips of cloth he'd torn off, attempting to tie them back around his head until his eye was completely covered once more. There, at least that would keep dust and filth out of the wound. Ech.

What else was the horrible behemoth running this place going to take? His arm? His entire head? The idea made him shudder. Why was she doing this? She couldn't hold him here as a prisoner forever!

"Perhaps the Tallest will notice my absence and send a search party," he said, tapping his fingertips together. He took in a sharp gasp. "But what Invader needs a rescue party? I mustn't worry them! I need to contact GIR, but she severed my radio…" Hopefully the little robot hadn't blown up the base or anything in his absence. Normally MiniMoose would keep an eye on—

Oh. MiniMoose.

Remembering the image of the desiccated remains of MiniMoose being drawn up into the ceiling by the computer, Zim pounded on the door again. "This has gone far enough! Release me immediately, you—ugly… robot… thing!"

The reply came after a few beats. "You know, you're going to be here for a while. Perhaps you should work on improving your insults. Anyway, I think we've wasted enough time. Continue testing."

There was a hissing sound and a chime as an elevator finally rose up in the glass tube, which slid open to allow him entry. Zim touched the cloth covering half his face before taking a step toward the elevator.
How much longer was this going to go on?

Chapter End Notes

Illustration by BabyCharmander at https://www.deviantart.com/blazingcoral/art/Wake-up-537919673
"So what exactly did you accomplish back there?" Gaz asked, one eyebrow raised, as they headed down a silent, empty hallway. Chell shook her head and offered no other response. That was about as much as could be expected.

They had slowed their pace since leaving the neurotoxin room, which Gaz appreciated though she would never say it out loud. Her toes scuffed along the ground every other step and her feet felt like five hundred-pound weights strapped to the ends of her legs. Exhaustion tugged at her limbs. She watched Chell walk ahead of her and wondered if the woman was feeling the same thing—her limp had gotten more pronounced since they'd been down here.

The annoyingly chipper green-and-white-eyed core that they'd found was still leading the way, though Chell, to Gaz's knowledge, hadn't given him a new destination yet. She seemed intent on keeping them moving and getting them as far away from the neurotoxin production center as possible.

"Any idea what time it is?" Gaz asked, though she didn't expect this question to be answered either. It was hard to keep track of the passage of time down here, with no natural light to gauge it by. Chell turned her head toward Gaz and paused, her eyes softening. Gaz caught the glance and wondered how tired she looked to was stupid. How long had they been exploring this place? It was never-ending!

"Hey, want to hear a joke?" The green-eyed core turned around on his connector and zipped over to them. "What did one turret say to the other?" He paused for a second as if waiting for them to answer. When the two of them only stared at him silently, he continued. "Give up? She said, 'why don't our legs work?!' He grinned. "It's funny 'cuz they don't! They really don't!"

"That's not even a joke," Gaz said.

Undeterred, the core shook his handles in what Gaz took as his approximation of a shrug. "Yeah, I've gotta work on my material. I think it's all in my delivery, but I've got some really good ideas for jokes! I can't wait to test them out on you guys!"

Gaz was unable to suppress a groan.

"Because like, humans, you guys have got real senses of humor. It's not programmed into you, so you know when something is actually funny! Isn't that cool?"

Gaz ignored the core and looked up at a tap on her shoulder; Chell was pointing down another hall towards a room at the end. Gaz glanced at a sign on the wall. "Employee Daycare Center, huh?"

When they entered the room they found it to be cluttered with classroom-style desks, with a teacher's desk at the front and a projector screen emblazoned with a circular logo on the wall behind it. Chell walked up to a desk, looked at Gaz, and pointed to it. Oh, she wanted Gaz to sit down and rest. Maybe even sleep. How nice.

"We should just keep moving," Gaz said, turning to leave. Chell said nothing, but took Gaz's arm and drew her over to the chair, gently pushing her down into it. Gaz glared at her. "Don't touch me. All right, fine, I'll try to sleep, but you should too. You might drop dead of exhaustion otherwise."

Chell glanced at the happy-go-lucky core watching them from outside. His rail ended out there so he wasn't able to join them in the room.
"I'll keep watch!" the core said, his lower optic shutter pulled up in a bright smile. Chell tipped her head and sent Gaz a look that seemed to say, "He's kidding, right?"

"If you're so worried, we can sleep in shifts," Gaz grunted. "I'd notice if anything was trying to sneak up on us."

Chell didn't seem to doubt her, though she didn't respond. Gaz had given up expecting her to. The woman walked a few steps away and rifled through the satchel she carried at her side. After a moment she pulled out two meal bars, setting one down next to Gaz's elbow. Then she sat down on top of a nearby desk and crossed her legs, unwrapping the other meal bar and biting into it.

Gaz picked up the bar in front of her, peeling the wrapper off and eating half of it before wrapping the rest back up and sticking it in her pocket. She crossed her arms over the desk, rested her head on them, and allowed her eyes to drift closed.

This venture wasn't turning out exactly as she had expected. She hadn't really thought that they would be here this long. Maybe Dib was even more lost than she realized.

Tucked away in a dark little corner of the facility was a robot curled up into a spiny ball, with its knees pulled up to obscure the optic embedded in its oblong body, and its arms wrapped tightly around them. Orange could hear her own mechanisms ticking and clicking with every twitchy move she made, despite her efforts to keep still.

What should she do now? What could she do? She didn't even have a portal gun anymore because it had been ripped out of her hands by the little human that she'd saved earlier. Why had he done that? Didn't he remember her? Now what was she supposed to do without it? What would Blue do?

Blue… wasn't here.

Her objective remained to capture the human and the core, but they were long gone by now. She peeked out between the pistons that made up her legs and took in the hallway that was within her range of sight. There were many hallways here. Many hallways, many rooms.

This place suddenly seemed vastly, unequivocally huge.

She had never thought of it this way, before. You could get lost in this place.

Why couldn't she go back to solving tests with Blue? It was the one thing she knew she could do. The thing she'd been built for, and she yearned to go back. She was a testing robot, not a hunting-down-stray-humans-and-cores robot. She didn't belong out here like this, especially not on her own.

Orange attempted to make herself even smaller but succeeded only in causing something inside her to emit a pop!, which made her jump.

"AAAAHHH!" a high-pitched voice screamed nearby, making her jump again. She unfolded her legs and whipped her optic back and forth, finally catching sight of a bipedal construct a little ways down the hall and performing an immediate scan of it.

The robot was significantly shorter than she was. Also, it was apparently not from Aperture—she couldn't pull up any files on it. Question after question ran through her mind. What was it? Where did it come from? Was it friendly? Was it equipped with weapons of some kind?

"Hi!" the robot said, trotting up to her.
Orange blinked rapidly, momentarily stunned. The strange thing spoke English with a working mouth. What? What?

But it wasn't attacking her, so… she returned the greeting with a high-pitched gurgle, adding a light wave.

"Look, I found this!" the unfamiliar construct said. It flipped open the top of its head, reached in, and pulled out a small furry mound of organic material, displaying it to her proudly. The material was an animal with beady black eyes, a pointed muzzle, and a long, skinny tail. It wasn't displaying any life signs.

"It stinks real bad!" the robot said cheerfully. "His name's George! He's dead! Wanna pet him?"

Orange hesitated for a moment before nervously reaching out and patting the creature on the head, commenting that, if it was dead, it didn't really need a name.

The other robot didn't seem to understand her. Or if it did, it didn't acknowledge her speech. It just strutted off, sticking the small dead animal on top of its head. "I'm gonna go show George to Zim!"

Where was it going?

Orange uncurled herself and set off after it a few feet behind. Now this was something she could do without a portal gun—figure out what this thing was doing! She would probably want to know about it. She didn't like strange creatures (or robots) wandering into the facility without notice.

Chell repacked her backpack for the fifth time, furiously coiling a length of rope between her palm and her elbow until it was wound tightly. She tucked it in at the top of the pack.

It still didn't satisfy her. She needed maximum efficiency. The ability to reach in and grab exactly what she needed right away could mean the difference between life and death down here. It had been different back when she'd been on her own, but now…

She glanced over at Gaz, sleeping silently with her head resting on a desk. The girl seemed fine for the time being. Good. Chell looked away again and rubbed at her forehead, casting her eyes downward. Her limbs felt heavy, but she would be fine with some rest—her body wasn't requesting sleep yet. After all, she had long ago become accustomed to going long hours without sleep, and now she would have to forgo that luxury until the boy they were searching for was out of immediate danger.

"…Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen," the green-eyed core out in the hall said softly. "There's seventeen desks in that room! Four of them have paper on them!"

The core had taken to counting everything in the room. His voice grated on Chell's ears but she grudgingly allowed him to chatter to himself, as long as he kept his voice down. The constant sound of another voice was something she'd gotten used to in this place, anyway.

Where should they go next? They had knocked the neurotoxin generator offline, but that wouldn't last forever. She would have some way of getting it back up and running, and they needed to be gone when that happened.

They could find a way to disrupt the turret production line, of course. However, Chell knew without a doubt that she would have made significant changes to it to prevent someone from messing it up again. And going there would use up some of the precious time they had to find Gaz's brother and get everyone out. Finding him was the top priority. But how would that even be accomplished? The
facility was enormous.

Had he been captured and put into testing? The last she'd seen, he had been in the Extended Relaxation Center, but that had been at least a day ago. Was he even still alive?

"Dib's still alive," Gaz said, as if she'd read her mind, and Chell looked over to see that the girl had one eye cracked open. Maybe she'd never been asleep at all. "Believe me, I know when things are dead." She closed her eyes and seemed to go back to sleep. Chell was left to try to process what she had just heard.

"I guess opossums won't fool you, then!" the core said to Gaz, grinning. "Get it? Because opossums play dead!"

The girl tightened her arms around her head and acted like she hadn't heard him.

"So where're we off to next?" the core asked loudly. Chell frowned at him, holding a finger to her lips for silence. The core seemed to get the hint but only dropped his voice to a pseudo-whisper. "The little one's trying to sleep, okay! I'll be really super quiet! Where are we going next? I could show you panel construction! Or cube construction! Or both! Those are super cool! Or turret production, or the place where they make the tubes! Have you ever ridden in the tubes?"

The answer to that was yes, but Chell didn't reply. The core was asking the same question she'd been asking herself. They had taken out the major threat of the facility—neurotoxin—but what next? Turrets? Those could usually be dealt with using some clever thinking and a few well-placed portals if you happened to have a portal gun (which Chell didn't, but she could make do). Neurotoxin wasn't so easy.

She made up her mind quickly. She was good at that.

"It's totally cool if you can't talk, by the way!" the core said out of nowhere, making her flit her eyes back over to him. "Sorry if I'm making you feel like you have to talk, or something. That would be horrible and sad! I'll stop making suggestions. Wanna write down where you want to go, like last time? And I'll take you there!"

That… was actually a relief. Chell looked at the core for a moment, then turned away. She'd have to find paper and a pencil at some point.

Her hands were starting to feel restless again. She went to organize her backpack for the sixth time.

Seething rage.

It bubbled and broiled within, heating up the very circuitry winding its way through Her systems, burning deep in Her core.

She didn't let it show, of course, not that there was anyone around to see. The only signs of Her inner thoughts were the panels that lined her chamber flipping in an erratic wave motion that swept across the room.

She switched Her gaze to one camera, then another, then another. Nothing. No sign of the idiot core, and no sign of the human child either. Even the watch She'd stolen from them had been proving unhelpful—it still spewed the core's every word, but it was fading, lapsing into static at increasingly frequent intervals. It lay on the floor beneath Her. She fixed it with a cold look of loathing. This particular core working with a resourceful human was a combination that had led to disastrous results in the past, and She never intended for them to get the better of Her again.
But of course, that wasn't all. Something else was amiss. There were trespassers here, uninvited strangers traipsing through Her beautiful facility, somehow avoiding the cameras and making their way deeper and deeper inside as if they knew where they were going.

She hadn't seen them yet, but She could feel them. And they wouldn't be able to remain in the shadows for long.

"Good morning, progeny!" Professor Membrane announced as he entered the house with a flourish, his arms laden with grocery bags. "I have the sugary cereal you kids like to fight over. Sugar, of course, is a necessary component in the diet of a growing child!"

There was no answer from either of the children.

Membrane unloaded his multitude of bags in the kitchen and restocked the refrigerator with the essentials, stowing the non-perishables in various cabinets. "Son, it was a slow day yesterday with only three new cures to discover, and we're still making slow progress with the sentient AI project, so I worked on your problem of getting into space and I believe I have found a reasonable solution! Are you still interested in studying the moon?"

The kids still didn't answer but one of his floating screens approached him, displaying a message.

'Sir, both Membrane children [Dib, Gaz] absent from the house since yesterday morning."

"Odd!" Membrane said. "Well, we can't have two minors running around without adult supervision! Activate their tracking devices."

He said this casually, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world to say.

"Activating," the screen said aloud, a little red "loading" graphic appearing at the bottom. "Tracking complete."

There was a pause while Membrane studied the data.

"…Well then, I think this is one model of hover screen that can be decommissioned!" he said after a moment. "I've seen more than a few bugs from this version."

This thing had obviously worn out ages ago. Mighty dump, it was reporting the children as being almost across the state, and miles underground!

Gaz knew she hadn't slept for very long before she was awoken by the sound of whistling. A random, half-awake thought insisted that it was Dib, but it didn't take long to rouse herself and realize that that wasn't the case. The culprit was that green-eyed spherical robot. The thing seemed intent on driving her up the wall until she reached the point where she finally snapped and ripped his hard drive out. Maybe if Chell didn't mind (or didn't notice) she could take the core and reprogram him so he couldn't make any sort of noise. Or she could just sever whatever he was using as a voice box and render him silent that way.

Speaking of Chell, she must have noticed Gaz's stirring because she abruptly stood up, shouldering both her backpack and the canister of green gel. She still had her satchel resting against her hip, too. How much stuff was she carrying? Gaz reached up and brushed her finger against the visor of Dib's X-scope, still sitting on her head. She felt like she was really skimping out on carrying things.

"D'you know what?" the core—Nick, was it?—asked them from the doorway, ceasing his whistling
at last, "I never got your names! You have names, doncha?"

Chell raised an eyebrow in surprise, glancing at him.

"If we told you, you'd probably use them to make this trip even worse somehow," Gaz said.

"I won't! Honest!" the core said. "Please will you tell me?"

Gaz glanced at Chell, who didn't seem at all inclined to reveal her name to the robot. Gaz agreed with the sentiment and didn't reply to him. Chell, with a piece of paper in hand, walked over and showed it to the core.

Like last time, he squinted in order to read it. "You wanna go to Extended Relaxation now?" he said. "What, you want to destroy that, too? Haha, it's pretty big, you know! Also it's gonna take a long time to get there. I hope you're ready to walk!"

Chell nodded once.

"Okie-dokie then, let's go!" Nick spun around and motored down his rail, glancing back to see if they were following when he reached a juncture up ahead. Chell started to head after him but Gaz tugged on her sleeve.

"Hey, let me carry the gel," she said.

Chell stopped and looked down at her doubtfully.

"It can't be *that* heavy if Dib was running around down here with it."

Her companion hesitated, glancing at Nick outside and then shooting Gaz a Look.

Gaz cracked her eyes open and frowned. "Yeah, no. I won't *actually* spray him with it, even if he gets *really* annoying. Without him we'd probably end up even more lost than we already are."

Chell let out a breath through her teeth. She shrugged off the canister of gel and handed it down to Gaz, then turned without another look and walked briskly to where Nick was waiting.

Gaz pulled the canister onto her own back, tested its weight, and followed.

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His eye hurt.

…No it didn't, because it wasn't there. The area where it should have been was hurting. His PAK was doing its best to heal the wound, but even a product of amazing Irken engineering couldn't grow back a synthetic eye. Zim pressed the heel of his hand into the bandaged socket and grimaced.

He hadn't even started this next test. He stood at the entrance, hunched over, all of his concentration focused on the throbbing pain on the right side of his face. Every once in a while the computer chimed in with some taunt or insult. So what? She was just toying with him until she got what she really wanted, which was to completely take him apart. She wouldn't stop until he was dismembered and—

Visions of being strapped to an autopsy table, scientists hovering over him with glaring lights and cruel-looking utensils clutched in their greasy fingers, flashed in his mind's eye and a violent shudder racked his entire body.

"I'm beginning to think you've been damaged beyond repair," that loathed robotic voice said from
everywhere around him. "I've seen countless young humans survive worse than what you've been through. I guess they were all stronger than you. Who knew that your species would be less resilient than human children?"

Zim felt a stirring of anger at the implication, but he did his best to squelch it. "You don't know what you're talking about," he growled. Her words meant nothing to him. Nothing.
The only comments that mattered to an Irken soldier—and definitely an Irken Invader—were the words of their Irken superiors. Zim was to listen to none but the Almighty Tallest themselves. This filthy Earth computer was nothing compared to him.

"Perhaps you need a little persuasion." Several feet away from Zim, a panel pulled open and a single gleaming metal claw slid out.

A terrible sound filled the room and ripped through Zim's hearing organs, and all previous thought evaporated. His feet stumbled backwards but seemed to forget how to move properly, and the floor rushed up to meet him though it felt like he was traveling in slow motion. His PAK crashed to the ground and bounced him back up slightly, landing him on his side. He scrabbled at the floor, scraping his hands and feet on the gritty tile.

The claw came right up to Zim's face and his vision went white for a second. No pain came, however—the claw simply hung there, inches from his left eye. Zim froze as well, his chest rising and falling rapidly. The screeching sound had cut out and the room rang with the resulting silence. Zim realized that he'd been hearing his own screams.

It occurred to him through a fog that the computer wasn't attacking him—she was trying to intimidate him. Bile rose up in his throat, his mind reeling in revulsion at the knowledge that it was working. He struggled to his feet but kept his distance from the claw. "I'm not afraid of you."

The computer gave a low chuckle. "You're putting on a brave front. Admirable, but I think we both know better than that, don't you?"

The claw sneaked forward again. Zim's mind flew into a blind panic and he scrambled backwards, noticing only when his antenna withered at the acrid smell nearby that there was an acid pool right behind him. He'd nearly stepped into it and the claw was still coming closer.

"Ready to test?"

Whatever response she expected from him, he didn't have the chance to give it. From somewhere across the room there was the sound of an explosion followed by crumbling rock and plaster. Zim rubbed at his remaining eye, staring. Even the computer seemed distracted by the interruption.

Two little red orbs appeared out of the dust cloud where a wall had been moments before. A small figure stepped forward and gave a crisp salute. A second later the salute dropped, the eyes flashed back to their familiar teal color, and GIR beamed over at the cornered Zim. "I broke down a wall with my head!"

"GIR!" Zim choked, pushing himself once again to his feet. He swayed, dizzy with the surprising amount of relief that flooded through him at the sight of the little robot. "Finally!"

"What... is that."

The claw hung immobile in the air. Zim edged around it and stumbled toward GIR, trying to coordinate his feet into breaking into a run.

"Hold on," the computer said. The claw swung around, stopping between Zim and GIR again and
causing the former to flinch. "I knew there were intruders here. How did you get into my facility?"

GIR spread his arms out and ran in a circle. "Ooh, that's easy! I fleeew into the wild and fire! I
danced and died a thousand times!"

"GIR!" Zim snapped.

"Yet another useless and defective toy of yours, I presume," the computer said. "You seem to have a collection." The claw lashed out and snatched GIR around the middle faster than Zim could blink, hoisting the SIR Unit into the air. "Do you have any others I should know about? I don't appreciate their habit of breaking in to come after you. On the bright side, at least they're good to study. I've already broken the first one down into all of its component parts and I've found out quite a few interesting things."

Zim's eyes widened at the sight of GIR clutched in the mechanical claw. He saw it as if it was already happening—the claw crushing GIR’s middle like an empty can in a shower of sparks, the lights in his eyes flickering out and his limbs going limp.

"NO!" He leapt.

Zim slammed into the claw, grabbing its cable with both hands and battering at the metal prongs with his feet. "Let him go! I hate you! I HATE YOU!"

His PAK legs unfolded, three curling around him and the fourth aiming right above his hands and searing the cable with a laser. It took several lacerations before the cable finally snapped, sending Zim, GIR, and the claw clattering to the ground while the severed end of the cable was left writhing back and forth.

"What—?"

"GIR, c'mon!" Zim yelled, rising up on his PAK legs and suspending himself in the air. For the first time since he'd been here, his body sang with energy. "We're getting out of here!"

"I'm a-comin'!" GIR said, crawling toward him. He still had the claw clasped around his midsection. Zim reached down and grabbed his arm, lifting him up and carrying him as he ran for the exit that GIR had exploded out of the wall.

"Not so fast. I don't think you've realized that you're not quite done with your testing."

New panels began to come in to replace the old ones. At the same time, the severed cable retracted into the wall, and three intact claws slid out in its place.

Zim pulled up short just before he reached the wall. "GIR, destroy!"

"I'm gonna blow up everything!" GIR announced. His head popped open and a ridiculously huge missile launcher emerged, pointing right in the middle of the reforming wall. Zim ducked his head down just in time. "KABOOM!"

A missile launched, hit the wall, and burst it into rubble once again.

"Good work, GIR!" Zim said, looking up again. "Now, onward to victory!"

"No. Nonononono," the computer said. The entire room shook as she spoke. "This is NOT happening again. Don't you dare leave this room." Her voice softened, and took on an almost kinder edge. "We were making so much progress... Does that mean nothing to you? Do you really care so little for Science? You were a scientist once, according to your memories. Surely these things you're
Zim clambered over the rubble of the wall and retracted his PAK legs on the other side, his bare feet meeting the cold metal catwalk outside with a clang. It was the best thing he'd ever felt.

There was a bzt sound when the computer spoke again, like her voice had glitched slightly. "In all seriousness, I'm afraid I just can't let you wander off. What a waste of good Science that would be."

He was halfway down the catwalk already but he slowed his pace, partway turning back. His feet tingled with a familiar and dreaded feeling. GIR slipped out of his arms, landing on the catwalk while Zim, numbly, turned away from him and walked in a robotic fashion back to the hole in the wall.

"Where ya goin'?" GIR cried.

"GIR..." Zim gurgled, wanting to beg for help but unable to make the words come. He fought against his every step, but still his feet carried him back to the beginning of the catwalk.

The computer's voice came again, this time dropped to a lower, more dangerous register. "I know you crave freedom. You can taste it. You don't realize that it's already too late. Your freedom was stripped from you when I installed that chip in your PAK, don't you remember? And now I can be sure that it works. Sure, I will let you go eventually, but you will be bound to me. Your free will is ebbing away, Irken. You're going to make many trips Outside and back before I finally perform your autopsy. You're going to go out into the galaxy and bring me back every form of fascinating extraterrestrial life in your databanks.

"Your PAK says that your species can live for centuries. I'd say that's a good start."

He had reached the gaping hole in the wall. It hadn't been fixed yet. The three claws hovered just beyond, waiting for him. Zim trembled, but he didn't move any farther forward.

"Come back."

Zim started to take a step forward—then he fell backwards with a gasp, and suddenly he was in control of his feet again.

A little clock counting down from ten minutes flickered into the edge of his vision.

"Master, I think your thing is broken!" GIR appeared at his side, holding Zim's PAK out toward him. He must have walked up behind him and pulled it off his back.

Zim stood in shock for a moment. He choked down a sob, snatching his PAK from GIR and hugging it to his chest. "I'm not going anywhere," he said quietly. His voice cracked, and with that he looked back into the test chamber and shouted as loudly as he could, "Stupid computer! PAKs can come off!"

The three claws in the test chamber surged toward him, but he was already pelting back down the catwalk, GIR right behind him with the broken claw still attached.

A great rumbling shook the entire place. Out of the corner of his eye Zim saw structures around him fall. Something enormous swept down toward him and crashed through the catwalk not two feet in front of him; he skidded to a stop with a screech, then unfolded his PAK legs again, grabbed GIR, and swung himself across the gap. Though the catwalk was too narrow to use them effectively, he kept the PAK legs out this time, allowing them to grip the railings in order to keep himself more stable.
"Orange!" the computer's voice broke into the cacophony, sounding tinny like it was coming from a cheap wall intercom. "I know you're there! Capture the alien!"

With a whirring chirp, a tall construct jumped out of hiding some distance away from Zim and ran toward him with its arms waving—the thing looked, Zim thought fleetingly, like it was terrified out of its mind.

"That's my rat buddy!" GIR said, pointing at the other robot. "She followed me to find you!"

"You led one of them right to me?!" Zim demanded.

The world was disappearing around him, the other robot drawing closer. Its legs were much longer than Zim's own. There was no time to think. He retracted his PAK legs again and grabbed onto one of GIR's shoulders. "GIR, fly! Take us away from here! Fly us home!"

"Got it!" GIR said. Blue jets erupted at his feet and he took off into the air, Zim only just managing to hang onto both the SIR Unit and his PAK. They sped through the air away from the catwalk. Zim turned his head and caught a glimpse of the other robot, standing where he had been standing seconds ago, gripping the railing and watching them escape with a single orange optic. Then the image was gone.

This was not happening.

Her immediate instinct was to fling open the vents and flood the entire area around the test chamber with neurotoxin again. There was no telling what effect that might have on the alien, though going by the data She'd gotten from his blood and skin samples he seemed to have a respiration system that was very similar to a human's (albeit with the lungs merged into some sort of single super-organ with a ridiculous name that She would never say aloud). However, his PAK was equipped with a breathing shield, which when activated would protect him from any poisonous gases and provide him with a possibly limitless supply of oxygen.

Of course, he wasn't wearing his PAK at the moment.

She sent the command for neurotoxin, but none came. Instead She received a report that the entire neurotoxin production center was offline. Her optic constricted. Someone had tampered with the production center again.

When She caught that wretched core and the human child running around with him, they would both wish they had died in that incinerator.

She ordered almost the entire nanobot work crew over there to fix the problem. Meanwhile, She turned Her attention to the Cooperative Testing Initiative once again, ready to have them reassembled and given new orders. She exploded Blue immediately. As for Orange…

She refrained from exploding that failure of a bot until the last of the catwalk she was standing on had ripped away, falling into the depths of Aperture and taking her with it.
A/N: Hey guys :) I... guess I have a lot of explaining to do with this one.

It's been almost a year. I updated last July and then spent all of August working on something else, then I went back to school and had no energy for writing. That was also when I got into Undertale and it took over my life to the point where I couldn't even think about Portal...

But I never, ever intended to abandon this story, so now it is back! :D I'm sorry it took so long. Thank you so much, to all of you who stuck around. If you're ever curious about the real status of a story that hasn't updated in a while, check my profile, I'll probably talk about it there.

Oh, um, and I'm going to put a warning here for some body trauma (It's probably far too late for this, oops). I'll never do anything seriously graphic but you can never be too careful.

The rush of adrenaline he'd been feeling mere moments ago drained from his body as though blown away by the wind whipping through his battered antenna, leaving him feeling hollow and utterly exhausted. Zim tightened his grip on the two things he currently had hold of—GIR, flying haphazardly with Zim's arm wrapped securely around his neck and a broken mechanical claw still clamped over his midsection, and his own PAK. It pulsed ever so slightly under his fingertips in time with his heartbeat and seemed to grow colder with every second that it remained detached from his back.

Their brown and gray surroundings, a far cry from the polished white test chambers in which he had been imprisoned, flashed by them in an almost dizzying fashion as they flew. Zim buried his face in his shoulder and squeezed his remaining eye closed. His squeedily-spooch squirmed uncomfortably and he fought down the urge to be sick.

GIR would take him home. That's all that mattered. It was the only thing he could concentrate on anymore. Home, with his safe little house and his impenetrable security grid of laser-eyed lawn gnomes and his Voot Cruiser stationed up on the top floor, ready to fly should he ever need to make a quick escape. Safe, safe, safe.

"Hold on!" GIR's sharp, high-pitched voice tore at his antenna and Zim winced. He opened his mouth to tell the robot off when GIR shot off an energy bolt from a laser gun in his head and there was the sound of a great deal of shattering glass. The two of them made an abrupt turn upward—Zim's forehead smacked into GIR's back and the teeth of his open jaw clamped down over his tongue. He gasped, spat out blood, and clung on tighter.

"GIR!" he shouted, squinting. His surroundings were now blurred and wavy, as if they'd gone underwater. Had something happened to his good eye—?! ...No, no, they were just flying upward through a glass tube. He relaxed slightly, only to tense up again in alarm and try to croak out a warning just a second too late. He'd heard what GIR apparently had not—or had decided to ignore.

Another deafening bolt of energy fired, and there was more broken glass. But no sooner had they careened out of the tunnel and into a small room than they were surrounded by a chorus of child-like voices saying, "I see you!" "Hi!" "Hello, friend," and "That's it! I'm sick of not being able to finish our choir practices! I say let him have it!"

Shots rang out all over the room. GIR bucked as at least one made contact. He screamed, the jets in
his feet sputtering out and causing them both to plunge to the ground. Zim cried out, too, hitting the ground in a roll and darting with both GIR and his PAK toward the only shelter he could see, which was the partially-destroyed elevator tube they had just flown up through. When he'd ducked behind it and was out of range he crouched, his heart hammering out of his chest and his breaths coming in short gasps.

"GIR! GIR, where were you hit?" he demanded, dropping the PAK and holding the SIR Unit out in front of him by the shoulders. GIR's head lolled and he hung there limply for a moment, making Zim's blood run cold, but then the teal lights in his eyes flickered back on and he let out a giggle that sounded a bit off-kilter.

"Let's go again!" he cheered.

The robot's frame was now marked with dents and one or two bullet holes, but he seemed to be mostly all right. Zim forced himself to breathe more steadily.

"Okay. Good. You just… sit there and recover while I do planning things." He let GIR drop to the ground and peered through the glass tube at the ring of turrets. They had all stopped shooting, though the ones at the opposite end of the circle, all of which were directly facing him, had their guns out and their red targeting beams trained on him through the glass. If he so much as held a hand out in the open it would probably be shot off.

Luckily, in the chaos of their emergence from the tube, several of the turrets in the circle had been knocked over and deactivated. So that was something.

He turned back to GIR. "Where were we heading?" he asked. "How do we get out of here?"

"Lookit I found!" GIR said. "I forgot to show you!" He popped open the top of his head, reached in, and presented Zim with a dead rat, beaming.

Zim's antenna twitched. "'Kay, how about let's just focus on getting out of this room first."

There was a door across the room. No telling what would be behind it, but it had to be better than a room full of turrets, right?

"Okay, GIR. Listen very, very carefully," he said. GIR was lounging against the tube with the dead rat lying over his eyes. "And get rid of that filth!" Zim swatted the rat away. He then took hold of the claw still gripping GIR's middle and wrenched it open, pulling it off him and tossing it to the side. He lowered his voice. "I need you to run out there and take out those turrets. You can just knocked them over, throw things at them, shoot them, I don't care! Just get rid of them! They probably won't shoot at you or anything since you're a robot too."

GIR was silent for a moment, not even responding to the removal of the claw. Then he smiled widely and chirped, "Okay!" before he sidled out into the room and into the midst of the turrets. They tracked him with their red beams but didn't shoot.

"Now, GIR!" Zim called.

"Who are you?" one of the turrets asked as GIR approached.

Very, very slowly, GIR reached out a hand. He stuck out a single finger, or as close as he could get to it with his metal mitten-hands, and gave the turret a light poke just above the eye.

"Boop," he said.
Zim slammed the side of his fist on the elevator tube. "No, GIR! Attack it! Knock it over!"

"What am I doin' again?" GIR asked loudly, leaning back and craning his neck to look over at Zim—who, in turn, got to his feet and stormed out into the open.

"Forget it! It's clear that I will have to be the one to—"

He broke off and dove to the left, narrowly avoiding the stream of bullets that came at him.

"Target acquired!" several of the turrets chirped. Zim stumbled upright and tore around the outside of the ring, whipping away anytime a turret prepared to fire at him. A bullet grazed his foot as he was dodging and he toppled to the ground.

"Wait!" he cried. The turrets took aim again and he climbed, too slowly, back to his feet. "WAIT! Stop, don't shoot! I can- I can teach you a song! I can teach you a new song to sing! I sing real good!"

He covered his face, screaming, but after several seconds he lowered his arms. The bullets hadn't come this time.

"You can sing?" one of the turrets asked.

Zim edged away from them, favoring his hurt foot. "Er, yes! I'm the best Invader at singing, you know. I can sing rings around, eh…” His mind cast around for something, anything. "…Turtles!"

"Wow!" a turret breathed.

"Teach us!" another one said after a second.

"Sing something!"

He stared. His mind, usually working in overdrive, now drew a huge glaring blank at the prospect of pulling up a song to start singing.

"Errr…" Zim cast a pleading look at GIR for help. GIR just grinned and held up his hand like he was waiting for a high five, which was neither helpful nor even really encouraging. "Well, uh… Check this one out!" He pumped his arms up and down and kicked his legs a little and attempted to spin a melody out of thin air. "Doodoo dee doodee doo dee tee dee…"

"Never mind, stop singing!" a turret said.

"I've never heard anything like it. Our eyes have been opened," a turret on the far side of the circle marveled.

"So… can we go?" Zim asked, jerking his thumb toward the door.

"Sure," one turret said.

"Not so fast! We didn't like your song!" another one argued. "We have to shoot you. It's the rule."

Zim glanced over at the door. "If you let us go I'll come up with a different song to sing for you," he said.

Every one of the turrets sprang their side panels open and leveled their guns at him.
"I mean if you let us go, I'll never sing again!" Zim amended hastily.

There was a pause.

"Fair enough," the same turret, which seemed to be the leader, said. They all collapsed their side panels again and directed their targeting beams back to the center of the circle, away from Zim. "Now where were we this time?"

Blinking, Zim edged back toward the elevator tube. When none of the turrets responded he ran back, grabbed his PAK, and pelleted over to the door. He activated it and it opened to reveal yet more yawning chasm full of catwalks. "Come, GIR! We must fly again!"

"Kaaaaaay!" GIR dashed forward, smashing into the wall right next to Zim.

Zim groaned, frowning down at him. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea for GIR to try to fly while damaged. But what other choice did they have? None, if they wanted to get out of here fast.

"All right, GIR, take us home. Again. For real this time!" Zim grabbed hold of the little robot again. GIR gave the thumbs up, started the sputtering white-blue jet flames in his feet, and once again they were off.

Dib pulled one last sealed container out of the fridge and gave it a tentative sniff. All he could smell was old plastic. With a nod, he placed it on the smaller of two piles on the countertop, then closed the fridge and stood back to look over what he'd done.

He'd mentally dubbed the two piles "I'd rather starve than try to eat this" and "It probably won't poison me," respectively. The latter was the smaller one, while the former consisted mainly of foul-smelling cartons and jars that he dared not open.

His decision to return to the kitchen hadn't sat well with Wheatley, who refused to come in again and was standing guard outside. But Dib had no idea how much longer they'd be stuck down here and he knew he'd have to eat again at some point, even though right now the very thought of food was making him a bit queasy. The cereal he'd choked down earlier left his throat feeling dry and scratchy like he'd been eating cotton and it felt like a mass of sludge weighing down his stomach.

Dib abruptly turned his back on the piles. Another quick search of the room led him to a crumpled, dirty messenger bag with "Aperture Labs" stenciled on the side in faded letters, stashed in the back of a cupboard. Dib shook it out and unzipped it, setting it on the counter and storing all of the "good" food items into it. When the stack was depleted he added some dusty bottles of water that he'd found, which appeared to never have been opened. He zipped the bag up again and slid the strap over his shoulder. With one more glance around the kitchen he picked up his new portal gun and ventured through the exit door, back out into the corridor beyond.

Wheatley hung from the ceiling a few feet away with his back turned to Dib. He was being unusually quiet, swaying slightly on his rail with his optic twitching slightly.

"I'm ready," Dib said. Wheatley jumped at the sound of his voice, rattling his connector, and swung around to face him.

"Oh! Oh, good!" he said. "Got all your- all your supplies, then? Good, good." He blinked a few times. Dib had the distinct feeling that he'd interrupted some deep thinking—or as deep as Wheatley was capable of, anyway. "Everything's clear out here. No sign of those two robots! We sure showed them, eh?"
Well, we showed one of them, Dib thought. He'd never seen the orange robot's companion, and he had no desire to.

"Yeah," was all he said.

Silence fell as they both carefully looked anywhere but the other's direct line of sight. At last the two of them realized that there was no point in staying here any longer, and they moved out.

They walked without speaking. Somewhere along the lines a strange numbness like nothing he'd ever felt before had seeped into Dib's bones. He felt he had to drag his limbs to move forward, as if he was trying to walk through two feet of molasses. He dug his fingers into the strap of the messenger bag and clenched it so tightly that he could feel his pulse in his fingertips.

Had it really been just a few short hours ago that he'd found himself dangling above the raging fire? Up until that point most of the danger he'd been in had come only as a result of making a mistake during a test. As long as he was careful, he was generally safe. But that? That had been a deliberate attempt on his life, something he didn't normally have to deal with outside of paranormal investigations gone horribly wrong. And even those times had never been so… merciless.

He took a breath and let it out slowly. It didn't matter. Maybe he wasn't actually meant to survive. He'd never even been meant to exist, after all.

"You know, while I was up in- in space," Wheatley said out of nowhere, startling Dib out of his thoughts, "Well, before you got me out of there, I—er, I didn't really think I'd ever get out, to be honest. Have you ever spent a year hurtling nonstop around the moon in bloody freezing cold and silence? No, I didn't think so. It's definitely not pleasant…"

"I've been to space," Dib mumbled. "It's not so bad." He would've liked to go back sometime when he wasn't chasing down Zim in a life or death battle for the fate of the Earth.

How had he "won" that one, again? Oh yeah, he'd fruitlessly chased Zim around the solar system with a rocket-powered planet until the alien had destroyed his own scheme by flying straight into an asteroid belt. Right.

"It's bad when you're trapped up there for months and months on end," Wheatley responded. "Absolutely no one to talk to, even! Well, I mean, Spacey was there. Nice fellow but not much of a conversationalist, all he wanted to do was spout the names of the constellations and sing about flying to the moon. Yeah, while we were already on the moon! Or floating around it, anyway. Can you believe that?"

He didn't seem to have a point with this line of conversation. Still, Dib latched onto it at once, despite the fact that he firmly told himself he wasn't all that interested in the plights of this sad little core. Anything to distance himself from his own thoughts.

"How'd you get into space, anyway?" Dib asked, as Wheatley activated the electronic door in front of them and they stepped out onto the catwalk.

Wheatley hesitated at his question, surprised. "Oh I'm, I'm sure you already know the full story by now—"

"Not really. I mean, no one ever told me." Dib shot the core a pointed look, but it went totally unrecognized. "All I know is that something bad happened, and you… turned. And then you ended up in space? It doesn't really make sense and you've been dancing around the issue since I found you."
The metal plates of Wheatley's body shifted as though he were bristling. "Really? You know I can't dance—"

"It was just an expression, Wheatley," Dib said, intentionally putting emphasis on the name. The core stopped talking at once.

A moment passed in silence. Then Wheatley spoke up again.

"D'you trust me, mate?" he asked.

Dib stopped walking and looked around at him. "What?"

Wheatley twitched his handlebars a little while glancing away, reminding Dib of the way a human might shuffle their feet nervously. "It's just, I've been y'know, wondering, since it's never been totally clear, and, yeah. Especially with the part a little while ago where you yelled at me after I saved your life, remember that? Totally confusing. And if things had been switched around, you would've done the same for me, right…? And I wouldn't have yelled at you, so the thought has been sort of hangin' over my head for a while now, see."

Hm. Maybe the core wasn't the only one who needed to apologize for things.

Dib rubbed at his eyes under his glasses. "I'm sorry about that, Wheatley," he said, looking up at him again. "I shouldn't have acted like that. I don't know what came over me."

The core approximated a relieved smile. "S all right, mate. I'm sorry too. Bloody heck, it's not like you're the first one who's ever gotten angry at a bad time and said… um…" His optic shrank and he trailed off, his gaze darting around to look anywhere else. "Said… things."

"Hey, Wheatley, do you trust me?" Dib asked.

"Of course!" Wheatley said quickly, his optic snapping back to Dib but constricting even more.

Dib raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Wheatley simulated a deep breath, possibly to give himself time to think, and looked down at the catwalk. As Dib watched, his optic slowly expanded back to its normal size.

"…Yeah," he said, looking back over. "Y-yeah, I really do, little mate."

Here he was, Wheatley, the little core whom Dib had rescued from space and who had returned against all odds to pull him out of the incinerator. His friend.

Nothing else mattered.

"And I trust you, too," Dib said firmly.

The atmosphere changed; much of the tension in the air vanished, and Dib felt considerably lighter. They started walking again and Wheatley was beaming.

But then he frowned.

"Well, then, you should- you should know exactly who it is you're trusting," he said tentatively.

"All right, go ahead," Dib said.

The core simulated another deep breath, closed his eye for a second, and then began.
"I- I was in charge of something like ten thousand test subjects," he said. "Back a long time ago, way before any of this happened. You know that hotel crate you were almost trapped in? Yeah, the test subjects were all kept in cryogenic storage in those things, fast asleep and not doin' much. Watching over them was kind of a mind-numbingly boring job, if I'm honest. All I had to do was keep an eye on the levels on the crates and check life signs to make sure no one had, you know, died.

"The Facility was pretty quiet and empty. She was dead, not that anyone missed Her—quite the opposite—but, er, since no tests were being run, none of us had much to do. And I was pretty much on my own and no one bothered to tell me that the power for the entire Extended Relaxation Center was down, so none of the test subjects were even being woken up anymore and were pretty much dyin' in their sleep. Nasty stuff."

"You didn't check the life signs?" Dib asked sharply.

"I—! I, er, it sorta… slipped my mind. A-Anyway, after a while, warnings started cropping up that the Reactor Core was gonna blow up, which would take out all of us with it, so I knew it was time to leave. I went hunting for a test subject who would be able to get me all the way to the escape pod under the Central AI Chamber."

Dib broke in again. "There's an escape pod?"

"Possibly? I dunno, I heard the scientists mention it once, but it might've just been a rumor. We certainly didn't find one. But not many test subjects were still alive by the time I was looking for them. I had to track down the few that were still kicking but most of the remaining live ones weren't, since I think the cryosleep had pretty much turned their brains to mush. Two of them didn't have enough strength to get out of bed."

Dib's stomach roiled, his mind inadvertently flashing back to the list he'd seen on the Aperture databases, a long string of deceased test subjects known only by number.

"No one even got close to the portal gun. And then I found the lady. She couldn't talk, but she could run around and jump and do other human-y things, so even with a bit of brain damage she could get around just fine. We went looking for the escape pod but, ah, found a bunch of switches and, and, er… none of them were labeled… It wasn't my fault… But anyway, She woke up, somehow, bloody awful tragedy, and She picked me up in Her claw and—" Wheatley's entire body gave a great spasm.

Dib winced slightly, remembering the video from Wheatley's perspective that he had caught glimpses of on his computer. The popping flashes of colored light and then blackness. He stayed silent, waiting for Wheatley to go on, and didn't have to wait long.

"Well, I got better, sort of, and then I went to find the lady again so we could escape together."

"Wait, was this place still going to blow up?" Dib asked.

Wheatley waved his question aside. "Oh no, no, She stopped all that from happening right quick. We were perfectly safe! Well, er, I was, I mean. I was as safe as I could be with Her awake, seeing as I didn't really provide much of an interest to Her back then… and anyway, She thought I was dead, right? But the lady was stuck running tests and I knew She would off her eventually, it's what She always used to do. So in one of the later chambers I popped open a panel for the lady and we got out of there.

"I had the plan to take out Her turrets and neurotoxin, and then attack while all Her weapons were down. We did that—and brilliantly, I might add—and were sucked into one of the pipes, straight to
An uneasy feeling crept up Dib's spine. The super computer had more weapons at her disposal than just turrets and neurotoxin. What about the lasers? Acid pools? And those claws?

"So there She was, sitting there like a sitting duck, only, you know, suspended in the air like She is—a suspended duck—and here comes that Announcer voice tellin' us that Her core's corrupted and She needs a replacement. Well, obviously, I was meant to be the replacement, and the lady must've agreed—though it was kind of hard to tell, now that I think about it—because she went ahead and did it, stuck me in the receptacle and hit the big red button, and it worked, and then I really thought we were home free."

Dib stopped in his tracks and whirled around to look at Wheatley in astonishment. "Wait, so you replaced GLaDOS?"

Wheatley yelped, stopping with a lurch and swinging back and forth on his connector. "What'd you have to go and say Her name for?!"

"Geez, she's not Voldemort," Dib said crossly. "GLaDOS, GLaDOS! See? It's not even a spooky name!"

The core winced every time he repeated the computer's name, and his voice became smaller. "'S all right for you, you weren't crushed by Her—"

"Listen, you don't have any idea what I went through," Dib said. "And… am still going through. I'm calling her by her name from now on. You're just going to have to live with it."

"Well, just don't expect me to say it," Wheatley muttered as they started off again. "Where was I, anyway?"

"You replaced GLaDOS."

Wheatley flinched. "Right, right, yeah. So, I was in charge of the whole Facility then. Really suddenly. It was— it was pretty cool, yeah." A slight smile flickered across his optic. "Man alive, that first bit at the beginning was cool. I was stuck hanging from the ceiling but that's no different than usual, except I couldn't travel around and I was bloody huge—I mean, you saw that body She's in! Enormous! And just by thinking about it I could make a panel twitch in a test chamber miles away! Not that panel-twitching is that big of a deal. I could also speak and understand fluent Spanish, drop things from the ceiling, and control the lifts. I called one up for the lady and told her to get inside, it was gonna finally take her to the surface. I never figured out a way that I could get in there too, but, well, it didn't seem all that important just then. And then… and then…"

Wheatley's face fell. He was shaking slightly. To Dib it seemed that, despite how much it was clearly costing him, the core had been wanting to pour all this out to someone for a long, long time.

"And then?"

Wheatley glanced down at him, then away again. "Well, and then I decided I didn't want to leave just yet and I brought the lift back down, with her inside it."

Dib's fists clenched. To be that close to freedom from this place, only to have it all ripped away at the very last second because of your so-called friend? Had he made the wrong choice after all when he'd decided to trust the core?

"Didn't get any better after that," Wheatley said glumly, his eye cast toward the floor and his upper
optic shutter drooping down. "Just got worse, actually. She was lying all pathetic on the ground, couldn't even try to roll anywhere since Her head's basically like a giant box. Then She opened Her big fat mouth—metaphorically speaking—and said some stupid lies and I decided She needed to be punished, so I... I sort of... turned Her into a potato..."

Despite everything, that last part was so absurd that Dib snorted. "A what?"

"A potato!" Wheatley brightened up at once. "The Facility's full of 'em, left over from some kids' science fair. I grabbed a potato battery and shoved Her processor right into it!"

Dib tried to imagine the giant super computer's personality trapped inside a potato. It was a weird mental image.

"So then I punched—I, I mean, they both, er, fell down an elevator shaft," Wheatley said, averting his gaze once again. "A-and, and I thought, I thought, 'Good riddance!' Y'know? Now there was nothing holding me back from ruling the entire facility! But—as cool as it was at first, mate... It ended up being awful, just bloody awful. I had this, this mad Itch to just test and test and test. It must be hardwired into the mainframe or something. And when I made a test and someone completed it, the Itch went away for a bit and it made me feel so, so good. Best feeling in the world, if I'm honest, nothing like it."

"That... really doesn't sound good," Dib said uneasily.

"W-well, yeah, now it might sound a bit bad," Wheatley conceded. "But at the time it was amazing.

"Anyway, so, I was exploring what I could do, right? When, after hours and hours, the lady and the potato crawled back out of the woodwork. I mean, there's nothing made out of wood around here, but honestly, I've got no idea where they came back from. I thought that shaft was endless. It was good timing, though, 'cause all I had were some button-pressing box/turret fusions I'd thrown together and I really needed real test subjects."

"You made her run tests?" Dib said in disgust.

"Hear me out, hear me out!" Wheatley cried. "I- I did put her through tests, but- but that wasn't exactly me, was it? You wouldn't know what it was like! Trying to keep an entire Facility running? While being forced to test people? Not the easiest feat in the world, let me tell you! Eventually the lady kinda, well, escaped. She does that. Avoided my death trap and all..." He seemed lost in a memory for a moment, then snapped back to reality. "Um, and then they found my lair and attacked me. Those two make the worst team."

"But how'd you end up in space?"

"Er, well, somehow the lady shot a portal onto the moon," Wheatley said. "And don't ask me how that one worked, 'cause I've got no bloody idea. But I was sucked through, and so was Spacey, and I think Rex—or whatever his name was, he's another core. And then we were all orbiting the moon."

"That's all of it?" Dib asked.

"I mean, for the most part, yeah." The core suddenly looked genuinely nervous. "So... er, that answer your question, mate?"

"Huh? Oh." Dib had completely forgotten he'd asked the question in the first place. "Yeah... I think so."
At least he had a clearer idea of the full story now. So that was how Wheatley had gotten into a position where he could betray and hurt people.

He wasn't sure if he was meant to say anything else.

"It's- it's not the greatest story, I know," Wheatley said, coming to a stop above him. "But there you have it, you finally know everything. So- so I suppose you can think whatever you want of— … That is a weird sound."

"Huh?" Dib listened but all he could hear was the whine of distant machinery. "I don't—"

Wait, that wasn't a machine. Dib's mouth hung open. That was a very familiar scream—and it was coming closer, very fast.

"Watch out!" he shouted, throwing himself against the catwalk's railing just in time.

Wheatley wasn't so lucky—a blurred mess of green, orange, silver, and blue swept by him, knocking him clean of his connector with a snap. He screamed and fell.

Dib hefted the portal gun up and lunged forward, snagging Wheatley with the zero-point energy beam and crashing into the railing on the other side, leaving the core hanging out over empty space with only the gun and Dib's trembling arms to keep him from plummeting into the void.

"P-pull me in," Wheatley said in a tiny voice. "Pleasepleaseplease for the love of Science PULL ME BACK IN!" He stared downwards, shaking violently with his optic constricted to a dot of light.

Dib backed away from the railing and levered Wheatley back to safety.

"Ughhh! …Thank you, mate," he said faintly. He shook himself and his voice steadied. "What the bloody heck was that?"

Dib wasn't listening. He took a few steps forward, still clutching the portal gun, and gawked at the thing that had hit Wheatley—well, two things, actually. They had apparently lost control and swerved into the railing some ways down the catwalk, and had slumped onto the metal floor.

"Oh no…" Wheatley moaned, pulling his handles in closer to himself. "Him? You've got to be kidding me. Dib, quick, run! I don't think he's seen us yet! Run!"

Dib recoiled. In front of him, Zim untangled himself from his robotic minion and stood up, stumbling and pressing his palm to his head. Dib took a step back. The alien looked awful. He was out of disguise, but one of his antennas was slightly shorter than the other and lacked the well-defined tip, as though it had been cut off and partly grown back at some point. Half his face was wrapped in a bandage stained with a pinkish substance. (Blood? Alien blood? Had something happened to his eye?) He was wearing a filthy orange jumpsuit—although come to think of it, it probably wasn't any worse off than Dib's own—and his feet were bare, the black nails on the ends of his toes chipped and broken. He had braces strapped around his knees. The green skin surrounding them was puffy and inflamed. Dib glanced down at the long fall boots he himself was wearing and felt infinitely more grateful for them.

"Home, GIR!" Zim said, grabbing his robot pet and shaking him. "How- how many times do I have to tell you? THIS IS NOT HOME!"

"Ah took ya as far as Ah could," the robot said, putting on some sort of bizarre Southern-sounding drawl. "S gonna cost ya extra otherwise."
Zim tossed the robot down. "I'm not paying you to—" The half-finished sentence dried up in Zim's throat when he turned around and spotted Dib, freezing in place with his antenna going straight up in the air. For the first time, Dib noticed that Zim wasn't wearing his PAK and instead clutched it in his arms.

"Zim?" Dib said, after opening and closing his mouth a few times. There were many things he'd have liked to say at his archenemy's sudden and loud appearance in this horrible place, but only one of them came out. "…What happened to your face?"

"You," Zim whispered, so softly that Dib almost didn't catch it. Wow, that was probably the quietest that Zim had ever spoken. "YOU! How dare you look at me! HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME!"

He threw his PAK on the floor with a clang and launched himself forward, spittle flying from his mouth and his antenna flicking back against his skull. Before Dib could do anything but widen his eyes in shock, the alien had barreled him over, flailing as he tried to wrench the portal gun away and slice at every part of Dib he could reach with uncovered claws that suddenly looked exceedingly sharp.

"AAAUUUGGH!" Dib screamed and hid his face with the portal gun. He kicked out at Zim and felt his boot connect with a kneecap. Zim let out a screech of pain and fell away. Dib tried to struggle back to his feet. "What are you doing?"

Zim got back up, limping but otherwise trying to ignore the injury to his knee. His only goal seemed to be to cause as much damage to Dib as possible as he leapt again, punching wildly and screaming, "DIE! DIE! Diediediediediediedie!"

"Stop fighting! She'll hear us any second now!" Wheatley cried desperately, still held in the beam from the portal gun. Without stopping to think Dib heaved the gun over his shoulder and swung it around, smashing Wheatley into Zim's head and knocking the alien off him.

"Ow!" the core shouted.

Zim crumpled to the floor and rubbed at the new bruise on his head. He didn't attack again. Instead, he stood up and pointed straight at Dib. "GIR! Attack the enemy!"

"Okey-dokey!" GIR chirped, his eyes flickering to a deep, dark red as a set of laser guns emerged from the top of his head. He was still standing a couple yards behind Zim, where the two of them had crashed.

"What? No, stop!" Dib dodged to put Zim directly between himself and the robot.

The alien swayed and stumbled to one side, suddenly finding himself as well as Dib to be targeted by GIR. "Wait, GIR, don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

GIR's eyes glowed even brighter and he fired a barrage of searing hot energy bullets at Zim and Dib, both of whom had to dive to the side to avoid them.

"GIR!"

"This is crazy!" Dib shouted. "What do you want, Zim?!"

"YOUR DEATH!"

"What kind of bloody party have I gotten myself into?" Wheatley demanded.
"You need your PAK to live, don't you?" Dib, still doing his best to keep a grip on the portal gun and Wheatley, dodged yet more lasers. "Does it keep you from going completely insane, too?"

"I'm not putting it back on!" Zim snapped.

He leaped forward again to take another swipe. Dib pushed him away and then ran backwards as well as he could, losing his footing slightly due to the springs on the back of the boots.

"Sorry about this," he muttered to Wheatley.

The core looked at him in alarm. "What are you gonna—?!"

Dib reached out and took hold of Wheatley's handlebar, deactivating the portal gun's energy beam. Then he reared his arm backwards as if about to roll a bowling ball and flung Wheatley forward as hard as he could, watching the core roll several feet back along the catwalk in the direction they had come from before he turned back to face Zim.

As the alien ran toward him, Dib leveled the portal gun at him and pressed the last switch again.

He would admit, later, that he had no idea what he expected to happen with this. Part of him wondered if Zim would be unaffected by the beam and instead just end up crashing into him and sending them both over the edge. He had a feeling that the zero-point energy just wouldn't work on organic creatures or the specially-designed Aperture jumpsuits.

However, when Zim came in contact with the beam he let out a sharp, pained gasp, and Dib perked up in interest. Maybe it had worked after all…?

The beam seemed to be pulling at Zim's face. Zim arced his back, scrabbling his feet on the metal mesh floor as he struggled against the energy beam, and pulled himself free. He fell backwards with a scream, head over heels back onto the catwalk. Or most of him did, anyway.

Dib cried out in horror and disgust, dropping the portal gun and toppling onto the floor himself. Zim's one uncovered eye had remained trapped in the beam. A thick, fleshy nerve trailed from the back of the eye down into Zim's eye socket.

Zim stared in Dib's direction from the floor for a split second—though he wasn't really, was he, he couldn't see him, obviously. A gaping hole yawned where one eye should have been and a stained bandage covered the other. Raw panic was etched into every line of his face, and Dib couldn't look away.

Intellectually, Dib had known that Irken eyes were synthetic implants and could probably be removed without much harm. But no prior knowledge could ever have prepared him for seeing something like that.

Zim scrambled wildly on the floor until he located the eye. Without even wiping it off first, he stuffed it back into the socket and covered his face with his hands, whirling around and blundering back to GIR. When he reached the SIR Unit he collapsed to the floor again and curled into a ball, whimpering, his full-body shivering obvious even at a distance.

Dib, panting, got back to his feet as well. Zim didn't seem inclined to try to attack again.

"Well that was something," Wheatley said. He had come to a stop upside down a few feet down the catwalk. "That was definitely a thing that just happened. And here I am, on the floor. Guess I'm lucky I didn't fall off the edge."
"I had to get you out of the fight," Dib said apologetically, picking up the portal gun again. He walked back over to Wheatley and lifted him up in the energy beam.

"Right. Well, it's okay." Wheatley shifted around. His optic fell on Zim and his eye shutters narrowed in a glare. "Now let's get out of here."

"Hang on," Dib said. Gripping the portal gun, he walked toward the alien, still curled up with his face hidden, and the little robot minion, who was amusing himself by shooting energy bolts over the side of the catwalk and down into the chasm below.

"Get away from me." Zim cracked open his newly-replaced eye and fixed him with a look so full of hatred that it stopped Dib in his tracks. Dib swallowed hard.

"Zim, what happened to you? What are you even doing here?" he asked, and for the first time he really took in Zim's outfit. "...Have you been in testing?"

"Of course he was, I saw him myself!" Wheatley said. "Dunno how he got out, since I definitely had nothing to do with it. Bloody shame, if you ask me."

"You saw him?" Dib craned his neck to look down at Wheatley. "You never told me! That computer—GLaDOS—she said—"

"Get away from me!" Zim swiped feebly at them.

"Shut up for a second!" Dib snapped. "You were in testing, Zim?! The computer said she sent you home! She said she evaluated you and realized you weren't an alien so she sent you back! I almost..." He reeled as the realization struck him. "I think I almost believed her about you."

"Well, She lied!" Wheatley said. "She lies about everything so long as it suits Her."

"Lies?" Dib felt as though he'd been slapped across the face. Desperately he turned back to Zim. "Quick, what day is it? What month? Do you know?"

"What should I care what filthy Earth day it is?" Zim snarled, though his voice had gotten weak and the words were slurred.

"Er, it's still near the end of July, I think," Wheatley said. "But I'm not sure why that matters now when clearly—"

Dib's breathing hitched. "July?" he repeated faintly. "That computer... she told me I'd been down here for months. Before you got me out of there I didn't think anyone was coming for me."

Wheatley paused. "Well, I mean, I told you. She lies."

Dib stared down at Zim without really seeing him. If the computer had lied about all of that, who was to say she hadn't lied about... other things? It was a scant hope. But he clung to it, desperate to keep it, and felt a slight weight lift from him.

It brought him back to reality enough to suddenly realize that Zim had slumped down onto the floor again. Also, he was drooling.

"Whoa, Zim!" Dib said, alarmed, rushing forward and pressing his hand to Zim's forehead. His skin was cold and clammy. Ew. "Man, why aren't you wearing your PAK? That's what it's called, isn't it? Did you get hit in the head or something? I mean, before I hit you." He set the portal gun down and picked up Zim's PAK instead, holding it out to him. Zim used perhaps the last of his strength to back
away and hiss.

"I thought you needed this thing to live?" Dib said, bewildered.

"What?! Then why are you trying to give it back to him?!" Wheatley demanded. The portal gun's energy beam had cut off and he had rolled into the railing. "Send it off through a portal! Toss it off the catwalk! C'mon!"

Dib scowled and shoved the PAK over to Zim again. "If you die because you're too stubborn to put on your life support thing, then we're leaving you and your stupid robot behind. We don't have time for this. But if you put it on we might be able to work together to get out of here. Okay?"

"You- you—" Zim whispered, batting at his PAK with trembling hands. "You brought—"

"—Your electronic backpack over? Yeah. I'm trying to save your life. Not sure why I'm bothering."

"No. You brought me here…"

"No, I didn't," Dib said.

"He's gonna try to kill us both!" Wheatley shouted from the floor. "He tried to take me apart, remember? And now he's come back to finish the job! Why are you helping him?!

Dib pressed his lips together and looked back at Zim. His arch-rival was sitting hunched over his PAK but made no move to reunite with it.

"Zim! Put that thing back on already!" Dib marched over with half a mind to give the alien a swift kick. "C'mon! And don't attack me again when you've got it on, either."

Zim's teeth were chattering. "I c-can't…"

"Okay." Dib let out a breath through his teeth. "Don't tell anyone I did this." He bent down and wrestled the PAK out of Zim's grip—he put up more of a fight than Dib had expected, but as soon as he got the PAK away from Zim the alien keeled over and wrapped his arms around his legs.

"You're pathetic," Dib muttered. He stepped over Zim's huddled form so he could stand at Zim's back. Dib oriented the PAK to what he figured was the right direction, and pressed the flat side to Zim's spine. Immediately there was a chnk sound and the PAK held fast. Dib drew away quickly, back on his guard in case Zim decided to attack again after all.

Zim rose to his feet, swayed, shook his head, and seemed to come back to himself all at once. "What did you do?" he snarled, rounding on Dib.

"I kept you from dying a really stupid death!" Dib said. "Now listen, we need to work together if we—what's wrong?"

Zim wasn't even looking at him anymore. He'd turned away and clutched at his temples, whimpering again. "Nyggheeesh… I can feel it… starting already… GET IT OFF ME!" He turned and tried to take a step forward, tripped, and sent himself toppling into Dib. He grabbed hold of Dib's collar and sagged against the floor as though his legs had given out. "Can't… Have to… have to… go back…"

"Quit it! You're freaking me out!" Dib pried Zim's hands off his jumpsuit and backed away. "Man, this place must've gotten to you even more than it got to me. What happened to you?"

"You can't understand!" Zim was crouching on the floor, his fingers pressed to his temples and his
one visible eye closed tight, tears leaking from it. Zim was... crying. "You wouldn't understand, human! FILTH! I can't wear my PAK anymore, don't you see? But I still need it! I hate this! I hate YOU!"

"There, there, Master," the quiet voice of Zim's little robot said, coming over to pat Zim on the arm. Dib had forgotten he was even here. "Don't worry, we can ride the ponies tomorrow."

"Yes, GIR, of course we can," Zim said absently. He relaxed into the robot's side and took deep, gulping breaths. Dib and Wheatley glanced at each other, neither sure of what they should do.

Dib took a few steps forward, carefully. "Zim..."

Zim's gaze snapped to him and his eye narrowed. Dib hesitated, then decided to continue.

"I don't know what this is all about, but whatever you might think, I didn't bring you here. Okay? I didn't even know you were here. This place is crazy. And dangerous. However the two of us got into this mess, I think we need to put all that enemy stuff to the side for now and work together to get out of here. Okay?"

Zim blinked, his expression unchanging. "You told the computer about me. You're the reason she found me. You're working with her!"

Dib froze, stung more than he ever thought possible from just a few words. "I'm not working with her! She tries to kill me every time she sees me! I told her about you when I first met her, yeah, but c'mon, what'd you expect? You're trying to destroy my planet, and don't even try to tell me you wouldn't do the same thing to me! Besides, I didn't know she'd somehow kidnap you and drag you down here."

"Dib was stuck in testing just like you were ma—aaaaalien," Wheatley added, stumbling over his reluctance to call Zim "mate."

"Look, Zim. The truth is, I wouldn't wish this place on anyone," Dib said, looking away and scratching the back of his head with a frown. "Not even you. Okay?"

He was tired. He was so tired.

Slowly, Zim got to his feet, keeping one hand on his robot. "GIR, whatever you do, don't let me walk away from this spot," he said. The little robot wordlessly shifted to latch both of his arms around Zim's middle in what was either compliance to the odd command or a hug. The alien looked back over at Dib and wiped his tongue over his lips, shivering, and then scowled. "Fine, Dib-thing. We'll work together to find a way out of this prison. But I won't forget this. Ever. And when we get out, I'm feeding your intestines to my intestines-devouring... fish... thing. Which is in my lab."

Dib resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Sure, Zim, okay. Let's just get out of here before we think about feeding anyone to anything."

"I'm gonna feed Zim to my pet llama!" GIR said.

"And..." Zim continued, tensing up and clenching his fists. "You will never, ever force my PAK back on me again."

"What, even if you're on the verge of death?"

With an enraged cry, four spindly, metallic spider-like legs unfolded from Zim's PAK and lifted him off the ground so that he towered over Dib. Two of the legs were constructed differently than Dib
remembered—they were gleaming black and white and a touch more crude-looking, appearing to have been made from discarded turret parts.

"You will not put my PAK back on me!" Zim snarled.

Dib backed off with his hands held up in a calming gesture. "Okay, okay! I won't, sheesh. But why not?"

The angry fire in Zim's eyes burned out and he dropped back onto the ground with a *clang*. "That's not important." His voice sounded more like a croak. "GIR, remove my PAK."

"You make me do everything!" GIR shouted. But he reached behind Zim and pulled the PAK off, dropping it onto the catwalk and dusting off his hands. "All done!"

Zim looked over at Dib, his eye narrowed. "Now, Dib-human, we can discuss what to do from here."

"Wheatley says he's got a plan." Dib picked up Wheatley off the floor once more and carried him over to the connector still hanging from the ceiling.

"I do have a plan, yes, but it never involved *that* bloke," Wheatley said. "Just put me back on my rail and we can be on our way again." He shot a dirty look at Zim. "To reiterate, we can go on now. Without him."

"You said the only way to survive this place was by working together," Dib pointed out.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Wheatley groaned. "I meant working together with *me!* Not with someone who tried to take me apart! And didn't you say he was your archenemy or something?!"

Dib didn't reply to that. He lifted Wheatley up and pressed his back port up against the connector. With two *clicks*, Wheatley reattached himself and motored around a little to test it out. "Good, thank you."

"Oh, I remember you." Zim approached them, frowning up at Wheatley in distaste with his PAK tucked under his arm. Wheatley let out a little squeak and ran away a few feet. "*You're* the one with the plan?"

Wheatley looked down at Dib, then back at Zim, and then at Dib once more. The expression in his optic turned irritated. "Er, yes," he said. "Okay, just- just follow me, both of you, and I'll give you the details later."

He travelled over their heads and down along the catwalk, glancing behind at them. "Well, if you're coming, come on!"

"Come on," Dib repeated, following after him.

Zim clenched and unclenched his free hand, looked down at GIR, then straightened up, squared his shoulders, and trailed behind.

"*How long ago was this?*

The tone of the question was quiet, measured. Down on the dark gray floor, the single turret standing near the center of the room rattled a little as it focused upwards, looking like it wished for nothing more than the ability to scuttle backwards on its immobile legs.
"Um, um, not too long ago?" it squeaked. "The little green thing interrupted our choir session, we were practicing that song you made up about still being alive—"

"I don't care what you were practicing."

She drew Herself up and centered Her attention on the cameras stationed in the room in question. Yes, part of the elevator tube was shattered, and there was a ring of turrets with a few knocked to the ground.

"Did the alien have something on its back?" She asked.

"I don't… think so?" the turret offered nervously. "It had a weird little robot with it, though. They escaped us and both ran out through the door in that room."

"Very well. Thank you for your cooperation. That will be all."

Just as the turret was thanking Her, a claw reached down, plucked it from the ground, and tossed it carelessly into the incinerator chute. Its cries of shock were cut off as soon as the chute closed up again.

"You did well to bring me that turret, Blue." She turned to the squat, round co-op bot standing at the edge of the chamber. "Follow the alien through that door and track him down. I want him found dead or alive, though alive is preferable. I still have plans for that little monster."

Blue nodded his assent and left the Central AI Chamber. As he left, the reconstructed Orange walked in. She didn't carry a portal gun. Instead, in each hand she clutched a core by the upper handlebar.

"Y-y-y-you w-w-wanted to see us, B-B-B-Boss?" one of the cores, its optic a dull red color, stammered. "H-h-have we d-done something wr-wrong?"

"Is this about Nick?" the other core, speaking in a feminine voice, asked in a near monotone. "He's been gone a long time. I have no idea where he went, so I can't help you there. Sorry."

She looked the two cores over skeptically. "Fear and Boredom," She said. "Not my top two choices, but I suppose I'll have to work with what I have. You met the Intelligence Dampening Sphere recently, correct?"

"Oh, yeah," the Boredom Core said, a hint of recognition in her voice. "ID. He was pretty weird, wasn't he?"

"S-super weird, very weird!" the Fear Core stuttered.

"I think he was trying to get into the Relaxation Center," Boredom continued.

"He was. And I think he'll likely try again." She lifted a small watch in Her claw, peering at it closely. Tinny audio came from it, buzzing and alternating between scratchy static and faint words spoken in the accented voice of the ID Core. "The signal in this watch has weakened and it's harder to track this metal ball's movements. The two of you must find him. Follow him. Distract him if you have to, in order to give Blue or Orange time to retrieve him and the runaway test subject he's traveling with. There is a human child, a fugitive core, and a valuable alien and its pet running loose in my Facility, and I'll never have any peace of mind until all four of them are brought in front of me. So I would get on that. Or else, I think, you'll find yourselves regretting it very, very much. Are we clear?"

"I guess," Boredom said.
"Yes! Yes, yes, yes, crystal! Crystal clear!" Fear said, his optic wide with panic. "W-we won't let you down!"

She smiled at that.

"You should hope not."
A/N: Once again I have to apologize for the extreme lateness of this chapter. I'm sorry that updates of this story have been so sparse since about two summers ago, but just know that I'll never abandon it. I want to see it through to the end.

"I think this thing is running out," Gaz complained softly at the back of the small procession. The girl moved so silently that if she hadn't spoken, Chell would have wondered if she was still there.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Gaz traipsing several feed behind, messing with the hose attached to the container strapped to her back, the strange visor she was wearing on her head slightly lopsided. A blob of acid-green Corrosion Gel—the name which Chell had unofficially given the metal-melting substance apparently invented by Gaz's father—plopped onto the grating of the catwalk under their feet. Chell grabbed Gaz's wrist and yanked her forward, running a few feet with clanking footsteps until they were safely away from the sizzling floor. It didn't seem as if much damage had been done but she wasn't taking any chances.

Gaz snatched her arm out of Chell's grasp. "Thanks, but I saw that coming. And look, I'm just saying that we've been using this stuff a lot. What'll we do if we run out?"

Well, we have other weapons, Chell thought grimly, fingering the satchel hung over her shoulder. Her handgun was still nestled snugly inside. It was not, of course, a perfect safeguard against the dangers of this place, but without a portal gun at her disposal it was the best she could do.

"Hey! I pulled up a map of the facility and it shows a shortcut through here!" an excited voice said. Chell looked up to see Nick the overly-happy core gesturing excitedly at a narrow opening with a walkway extending into darkness between two enormous, gray-paneled structures. "Extended Relaxation isn't too far away now. We've made great time!"

Chell nodded once and beckoned for Gaz to follow her into the alleyway.

"Do you really think Dib's in there?" Gaz asked doubtfully, not moving.

Chell reached down and touched Gaz's arm briefly; it was the only answer she had to offer. They'd wasted too much time already. The Relaxation Center was the only place they could look for real clues. The boy had been there when he'd contacted them, and surely She would have locked him up there if he'd been caught.

And knowing this place, he almost certainly had been.

She tried not to think about the exact contents of Extended Relaxation, the stacks upon innumerable stacks of crates once used to house unfortunate test subjects in cryosleep, and now mostly containing only skeletons and withered remains. Any one of them could have Dib trapped inside. But that was a problem for later. Chell had never gotten anywhere by worrying about how she might do something, after all. She followed after Nick down the narrow catwalk with Gaz keeping pace just behind her.

"Through here, I think," Nick said. He had stopped at a branch in the path and was bobbing his faceplate toward the left side before he turned back to them. "You know what, actually, there's a computer around here somewhere with a database that lists every currently-running test! Do you want to check that first? Or do you want to go on with the tour right now?"

Chell pointed to the catwalk.
"Okay, okay, tour first!" the core said cheerfully, zipping off down the management rail over the catwalk. Chell and Gaz followed, and almost immediately the dark alley turned sharply and opened out into a huge but crowded area.

Pale whitish light filtered in through the ceiling, illuminating catwalks and corresponding management rails running in every direction, skirting through the stacks of room-sized crates that filled the place.

"Welcome to Extended Relaxation!" Nick said happily. "People were kept here, asleep, before they were used in tests! It used to hold thousands and thousands of test subjects before they all sort of died out. Isn't that fascinating? Ooooh!"

Gaz looked slightly sick as she stared around at the boxes. However, she tore that expression down quickly and built up a look of annoyed indifference in its place.

"So… you think Dib's stuck in one of those things?" she asked.

Perhaps. Chell stepped up to the catwalk railing and gripped it, leaning forward to peer at the label on the nearest crate. The label looked ancient, worn and faded. It had various fields stamped with red X-es that looked largely scratched away with time. Test Subject. Adult. Male. Tall. The label was also printed with the date it had been packed and the date it would expire, as if the person inside was a packaged lunchmeat.

Would Dib's box be labeled? Was that still being done, or had that practice died with the scientists long ago?

"Could that be a way out of here?" Gaz asked, staring up at the open-looking ceiling with her eyes cracked. Chell glanced up as well, and shook her head. 'Sunlight' in this place could be misleading. She wouldn't trust anything until she set foot in that wheat field outside once more.

"So if you're looking for someone in particular, how long do you think it'll take us to search the entire room?" Nick asked, examining a different box with a thoughtful expression.

A new voice, feminine-sounding and devoid of much expression, spoke up then. Its owner was hidden from view around a towering stack of Relaxation crates. "What was that?"

Chell froze. Her finger flew to her lips and she stared down at Gaz, who was standing wide-eyed and stock-still as well.

"W-w-what was what?" a second, trembling voice asked.

"I'm sure I heard voices just now. Didn't you?"

"You have your au-aural processors turned up too high," the second voice chided, though he sounded too skittish to effectively tell anyone off. "They're too s-sensitive. It was probably j-just the w-wind."

"Oh, yeah. Sure, I forgot how much wind we get down here," the first voice said. "We should check it out. You know what She wanted us to—Wait, where are you going?! I said we should check it out! Get back over here and quit stammering every other word, you're getting on my nerves!"

Chell hurriedly backed up, almost colliding with Gaz, the springs on her long fall boots clanging with every step and loudly announcing their presence. She whirled around and tried to push Gaz back the way they'd come, her heart nearly pounding out of her chest.
"Get off me!" the girl growled, shrugging Chell off and ducking away. "I think I can tell when it's a good time to run without you yanking me around all the time."

At that moment two cores—one with an orange optic, the other with a dim red optic—slid around a bend in their management rail and blinked at the group in surprise. Chell side-stepped to block Gaz from their sight.

"Wow, She was right," the orange-eyed core said almost lazily. "A core and a human. I guess we found them."

The red-eyed core squinted at Chell and Nick through narrowed eye shields, tilting his faceplate. "B-but it's not a human child, and- and I really don't think that core's I.D.…"

Nick, still hovering near Chell, widened his optic in delight at the sight of the two cores and darted forward. "My friends!" he cried.

The red-eyed core blinked, suddenly seemed to recognize him, and fled back down the rail with a scream.

"Nick?" the other core said in genuine shock. "I didn't think we'd be seeing you again. What are you doing with this human? …Well, it doesn't matter, I guess. I've just got to report this and then you'll be dealt with and it's not my problem anymore."

Chell's hand flew to her satchel. Before she could even unclasp it, however, Gaz stepped out from behind her back.

"Good luck doing that blind," the girl snarled.

"Another human?" the core said, sounding surprised but skeptical, just before Gaz blasted a stream of Corrosion Gel at her.

Everything flew into chaos. The orange-eyed core let out a terrible scream, reeling backward, the gel eating away at her metal casing like acid. A few stray drops had landed on the catwalk, slowly melting small holes in that as well.

The red-eyed core appeared back in view and stared, horrified, at his companion. "I h-heard you scream! Gloria! What happened? Are you okay?!" His panicked look traveled from his friend to Chell, whose very appearance seemed to terrify him even more. "S-stay right where you are, y-you monster! I'm telling the Boss!"

He spun around and took off back in the direction he'd come.

Chell bit down hard on a curse and ran after the escaping core, jumping over the damaged section of catwalk and whipping her handgun out of her satchel, taking aim; only then did she realize how much more difficult it would be to hit a moving target than a stationary one. She took the shot anyway and managed to hit the core's connector. This ended up being a mistake.

"HUMAN ATTACK! HUMAN ATTACK!" the core shrieked, rocking back and forth in terror for a moment before charging off again, increasing his speed and rapidly outpacing Chell.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Gaz called from a long distance behind.

Chell skidded to a stop and almost tripped. She'd forgotten. Caught up as she was in trying to stop the core from raising the alarm, she'd almost left Gaz behind. Quickly she turned around and sprinted back to the girl.
Nick was hanging next to the core damaged by Corrosion Gel, nudging her with his handlebars in concern.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

The other core didn't respond; she just hung there, shivering. For a robot, she had become a gruesome sight—her casing was half-eroded with her inner poles and wires exposed and partially melted, and her eye shields had become welded shut over her optic. Something in her insides was making a dull, *chk chk chk* sound as if two things were clicking together that shouldn't have been.

Gaz saw Chell's eyes raking over the core and looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to hurt it *that* much," she said.

Chell tore her gaze from the core and looked at Gaz and Nick, waiting uncertainly. She waved them on ahead. Nick nodded quickly and obliged, with a backwards glance at Gaz.

The girl had her eyes narrowed at Chell as if she knew exactly what was about to happen. "Do whatever you have to do," she said bluntly. "But you know that other one got away. We'll probably have every robot in this place after us soon."

Chell dipped her head briefly, closing her eyes. This was bound to have happened sooner or later. They'd come so far without detection, but she supposed they'd been running on borrowed time from the start. They'd just have to salvage what they could of this situation.

Gaz shifted her attention back to the core she'd sprayed. She took a steadying breath, a look of deep regret on her face (regret for hurting the core or for what she was about to say, Chell wasn't sure) and shuffled forward, her feet dragging on the metal catwalk grating. She bowed her head and muttered, "Look—I'm sorry about the gel. I'm just trying to help my brother."

The core didn't appear to hear her. Gaz turned abruptly on her heel and left down the catwalk with Nick close behind. Only Nick looked back, a flicker of uncertainty passing over his optic. A moment after they were out of sight, Chell leveled her gun at the dying core.

It would be quick. And much more merciful, after all, than whatever lingering agony the gel might bring about. She told herself she'd do the same for a human, if they had fallen into an acid pool with no hope of rescue.

Her fingers tightened against the trigger. *I'm sorry.*

The shot rang out. It sounded much louder than she had expected, and it echoed in her ears for a long time afterward.

Her instincts couldn't get them far enough away.

Chell and Gaz tore down catwalk after catwalk with Nick running on his connector just in front of or just behind them. All three of them checked backwards periodically to see if they were being followed, but none of them had spotted anything.

Nothing yet, but if that core had really reported them to *her*, it was only a matter of time. Who could their pursuers be? Chell's mind flashed to the two bipedal robots running around this place, one of which she had very recently attempted to chase down while he made off with a screaming alleged alien.

Were those two robots stalking the halls, looking for them? Were they on their way right now?
She led the small group through several sharp turns, doubling back a few times when she thought they could risk it. She even picked Gaz up at one point and dropped down to a platform below them; they kept running, having landed safely thanks to Chell's long fall boots. It took Nick nearly five minutes to catch up to them, and Chell started to believe that maybe they'd gotten away.

Unfortunately, they had reached a dead end. The catwalk they were following came to an abrupt stop underneath a management rail that continued over a wide expanse of completely empty space.

"Wow, this looks pointless," Gaz said, gazing out at the chasm with a dubious look on her face. "Who designed this?"

Trying to take steadying breaths, Chell studied the emptiness yawning in front of them. It was just a bottomless pit. Jumping down there would likely take them into Old Aperture, if they didn't just land in an acid moat far below. The only ways to go were across the pit on the management rail or back the way they'd just come.

Her head jerked up. Echoing off the walls, she thought she could hear clanking footsteps. And she realized that, without having consciously made a decision, her mind was already made up. She swallowed heavily and gripped the railing in front of her, gritting her teeth. They couldn't be found. Gaz could not be found here. There was already one child lost in this place. There couldn't be another, not when Chell herself had brought the child here, not before she'd done everything in her power to keep Gaz safe.

She hated herself for this. But what else could she do?

"Nick," she said softly, her eyes hard, her voice not much more than a rasp. "How much weight can you carry from your handles?"

The core was so startled by her voice that he looked like he might fall off his connector. But he recovered quickly and beamed. "You can talk! So cool! What a reveal! But I can't carry much, sorry, it'll pull me off my rail. But that's okay, we could figure it out! What did you have in mind?"

She'd hoped for more, but there was still another way. Chell's gaze flicked to Gaz. "Her?"


However, Nick bobbed up and down on the management rail. "Yeah, yeah! I think she'd be fine, even with that thing on her back!"

With a brisk nod, Chell hoisted Gaz into the air and hung her unceremoniously from Nick's lower handlebar by the armpits, so that Gaz had to scramble for a better grip to keep from falling off.

"Whoa!" Nick struggled against the extra weight for a moment, sending Chell's heart into her throat, but he readjusted and waved at her with his top handlebar. "Wasn't expecting that! Now what?"


Now there really were footsteps. Distant, but too close for comfort.

"I know what you're trying to do, and it's beyond stupid," Gaz said, struggling to reach out for the catwalk railing. Nick had heard the commotion growing nearer and had drifted out past the catwalk, leaving Gaz's legs dangling over empty space. "What are you gonna do, try to lead them away? Don't try to be a stupid hero just because I'm a kid! I've played enough video games to know heroes just get killed!"
Chell jabbed a finger at them. "Go!" she commanded.

There were two sets of running footsteps now.

"I'm warning you, if you don't get me down from here—!" Gaz's eyes were slitted with fury.

Chell stepped back from the railing, still watching Nick and Gaz. She suddenly had the urge to call Nick back over, but she clenched her fist and pushed the thought away. "Don't come back here."

The two of them were still motoring away. Chell turned to leave.

Something small, hard, and white flew through the air and stung the back of her neck, falling onto the catwalk with a clatter.

"I hope that hurt!" Gaz yelled.

Chell snatched the object off the floor, recognizing it as the wooden skull pendant Gaz had worn around her neck since Chell had first seen her.

"I'm going to want that back!" Gaz shouted. "You'd better find me later and give that back, or I'll break every one of your limbs and shove rabid weasels into those stupid boots—"

There was no more time. Chell shoved the necklace into her satchel, gave Gaz and the core one last, fleeting look, and pelted away down the catwalk.

It was definitely much faster to travel alone. She ran full tilt down the catwalk, swinging around a right corner, but skidded to a halt when she reached an emancipation grill that spanned the entrance to a barren office, pausing for an instant; she couldn't let her clothes and equipment be vaporized. Instead, she turned around and sprinted until she came to another branch that led to an open doorway, leaping through and stumbling badly when she landed on the leg that still ached due to an old injury. Sucking in a pained breath, she forced herself to keep going, struggling to overcome the limp.

Every pounding step she took brought with it the same question—had sending Gaz away been the right choice? Had they made it? Would the girl have been better off staying with her?

Double sets of running feet answered that question for her, growing nearer. Chell fled down the hall and ended up on yet another catwalk, surrounded by clear glass tubes filled with cubes and other test-solving junk that zipped through them. Casting a hopeful glance over the railing, she wondered if it would be safe to jump again and land on something below, but she couldn't tell what was down there. She decided against jumping and continued running.

Quite suddenly, as if summoned from nowhere, there weren't two sets of footsteps—there were four. No, six—no, eight—all around her, echoing, and she realized with a jolt that the sounds of running were being played on the intercoms around the facility. Which direction were the real ones coming from?

In a split-second decision Chell jumped after all, vaulting over the railing and clambering onto one of the slippery glass tubes; she was forced to slide/crawl down it until she was stable enough to crouch on one of its relatively horizontal twists, and looked upward.

A flash of blue light flew past her face and spattered into a stream of particles against the glass tube next to her. Someone had attempted to shoot a portal near her. Chell ducked down to avoid more blasts and kept climbing, swinging herself out onto the next nearest catwalk and starting to run once more.
There was a series of excited, electronic gurgles nearby at the sound of her fleeing footsteps. She still couldn't see what was chasing her, but she could guess.

The path she'd chosen ended at a circular door in the wall. She hammered on it, willing it to swivel open—and it did. But when she stumbled into the room beyond, she found herself in pitch darkness. The size of the room and the nature of its potential occupants were completely indistinguishable.

_They were herding me_, Chell thought, hurrying forward at a faster pace while jerking her satchel from around her shoulders and diving into it in search of her flashlight.

_BAM!_ Reeling backwards, her head feeling split with pain, she dropped to the floor and only just managed to catch her fall with her hands. Her satchel flew out of her grip and vanished in the darkness.

She had run directly into a wall.

Chell wasn't sure she remembered how to breathe at the moment. She reached forward, feeling the wall ahead of her, smacking it with the palm of her hand. There were only solid panels. No. No. _NO_. Now what? Now what?

_Clap. Clap. Clap._

Chell's blood ran cold.

"I have to congratulate you two."

It was that _voice_.

She sat frozen for a moment, every muscle in her body tense as she crouched against the wall, as rigid as if she'd already been hit with rigor mortis. Slowly, inch by inch, she forced herself to stand and turn to face the front of the room, a bright rectangle of light from the doorway that didn't come close to reaching her.

"You'll be pleased to know that you've both made it onto my list of Top Five Most Hated Runaways. Which is not usually an easy list to get onto, because most people aren't so impolite as to completely reject someone's hospitality by escaping when they're only trying to do what's best for you. I know we had our fair share of differences when we last saw each other, but I think it's time we put all that behind us. For Science, of course."

A quick spasm of fear traveled the length of Chell's body and she shook her head to dispel it.

"Despite all that, you were so easy to recapture it was almost boring… Now, why don't we put you back in the one thing you're somewhat decent at? After all, very few people have ever managed to escape the incinerator without even being set on fire. You might say it's just an especially deadly… Test."

Chell's insides seemed to drop out of her at those words. No. _Never again._

The voice seemed to be on a roll, because it continued on. "Of course, if you don't want to test, I do have another important job I could give you. And after all, wouldn't your father be proud that you're finally making some worthwhile contribution to Science?"

…Now, that didn't register at all. Father? What father?

…Who did the computer think she was talking to, exactly?
"It's your choice, really. You could go back to the testing track or take up my other offer. What do you say?"

The lights snapped on, causing Chell to wince and squint against the brightness until her eyes readjusted. She realized dimly that she had been chased into what might have been a large storage closet at some point.

There were clanging metal footsteps and the two bipedal robots—one squat and spherical with a blue optic, and the other tall and oblong with an orange optic—stepped into the room and stared at her without venturing any closer. A heavy presence hung around them, as though something else were observing the world through their eyes.

There was a long, stunned silence.

Chell refused to move and simply stared at the two robots, her face an impassive mask and her jaw set.

"…Oh."

The voice seemed taken aback. Almost as if this was all completely unexpected, which left Chell more confused than ever.

"Well. This is… a pleasure." The shocked tone disappeared at once. "It really is a reunion, isn't it? We're all back here… But of course, if I knew you were coming, I'd've baked a cake."

Gaz was not afraid of heights.

But then again, she usually didn't find herself dangling by her fingertips over an endless pit, held up only by a happy-go-lucky robot moving along at a quick pace.

"You all right down there?" the core asked, trying to crane his optic downward to get a better look at her.

"Sure, I'm fine," Gaz managed to say. She remembered Chell's spring boots that kept you safe from falling long distances. Where did you get a pair of those, anyway?

"You sure you're okay? That doesn't seem very comfortable."

"You could always just go back and put me down on the catwalk," Gaz pointed out.

"But your friend told us not to come back! I think she just wants to keep you safe, that's all."

Gaz said something nasty under her breath.

"Hey, come on, only happy language here!" Nick said.

There was a pause.

Then, his voice dropping a little, he said, "Hey… remember what happened earlier? Back there? … Gloria'll be okay, right?"

Gaz was silent for a moment. When she answered, her voice was hollow with the lie. "Yeah. She'll be fine."

"Oh… that's a relief." Nick perked up. "D'you wanna play a game? How about 'I Spy'?"
"No."
"Twenty questions?"
"Not likely."

"Aww, come on! Come on, you think of a thing, and I'll try and guess the thing! It'll be super fun!"

Gaz rolled her eyes and let out a huff, blowing a strand of stray hair out of her face. There wasn't exactly much else to do up here and she figured she could use a distraction. "Fine. I've got something."

"Is it an animal?" Nick asked at once.

Gaz's fingers were cramping. She debated whether it was a good idea to try to shift her grip. "Yes."
"Does it walk on two legs?"

"Not in this dimension. Unless it's a costume."

"Is it a praying mantis?!" the core guessed, grinning.

Cocking an eyebrow, Gaz peered up at him. "That's an insect."

Nick flipped his upper handlebar. "Yeah! But I mean, if you take animal, mineral, or vegetable, animal's definitely closest to mantises, doncha think? Does your animal have wings?"

A soft growl escaped Gaz's throat. "No, and neither do I, so let's get across this abyss quickly before my hands fall off."

"Whoa! Does that happen with humans?!" Nick exclaimed in awe. The core was still trying to gesture with his handlebars for emphasis and Gaz had to squirm a bit to keep from being jostled too much.

"Just shut up and keep moving!" she snapped.

"Righty-oh!" Nick chanted, snapping his upper handlebar up in an imitation of a salute. "So, have there been any feature films made about your animal?"

"Uh…" Gaz thought for a moment. "Yeah."

"Cool! That would probably be useful info, if I'd seen any feature films ever."

Gaz pursed her lips. "Don't bother watching any. They're all garbage."

"Naaah, I don't believe that. Hey, look!" Nick nodded straight ahead, to where Gaz could see that the chasm finally ended and a platform waited. "Land ho!"

The core hurried over to the platform and helped Gaz lower herself onto it. She stretched and shook out her fingers, readjusting Dib's X-scope on top of her head, feeling that if she never had to take another trip like that again it would be too soon.

"I guess we're… sort of on the lam for a little while now, huh?" Nick said quietly, his lower eye shutter raised in only a small smile rather than his usual blinding grin. "That's a cool word, isn't it? Lam? Like a baby sheep but not. Do you wanna continue with the tour now? Or should we wait around here for your quiet friend? She's pretty nice, don't you think?"
"…Yeah, sure," Gaz said. Almost inadvertently she touched the place where her necklace always hung. Gone. She’d lost the necklace and at the same time she’d lost the one person who knew her way around this place, who knew what was going on—Gaz’s one chance at finding her brother.

She glanced up at Nick, who was exclaiming in wonder over the size of the gulf they had crossed. All right, so Chell wasn’t the only one here who knew what to expect in this place. That core had lived here his whole life. Gaz clutched the railing of the catwalk and gazed down into the misty depths, thinking.

They could not count on Chell to return. That much was certain. The woman had likely been captured and imprisoned (or worse) by whatever entity ran this stupid deathtrap. And if she somehow hadn’t, she’d probably be too busy avoiding that fate to come looking for Gaz and this happy, chatty robot sphere.

It was up to Gaz now. She was Dib’s last hope of getting out of here.

Groaning, Gaz slid down onto the metal grating of the floor and sat with her legs swinging over the side.

Why hadn’t she just minded her own business and stayed home playing video games?

Rap, rap, rap.

Three sharp taps with a gloved fist on the wooden door yielded no response. Professor Membrane tried once more and was met with the same result. Clearly, a different tactic would have to be used.

"Daughter?" He turned the knob on Gaz’s door and threw it open dramatically. "Daughter, I have respected your privacy by knocking but am asserting my authority as your father by coming in anyway! Where have you and your brother been hiding?"

The dark room appeared to be empty. Gaz’s bed was neatly made and looked as though it hadn’t been slept in for a couple of days.

Membrane shook his head. "Now, children, you know better than to stay out for several nights without my permission! How are you going to develop into respectable scientists when you run away without notification of your absence?" He left the room and closed the door behind him. Really, now, this disappearing business was getting out of hand, and he was losing his patience.

At that moment his communicator beeped and he answered it, receiving the familiar voice of his employee Simmons.

"Sir, I'm sorry to bother you but we really need you back at the lab!" Simmons said. Membrane's tinted goggles lit up with every word the other man spoke. "I think we're getting closer to a breakthrough in artificial intelligence, especially since that Aperture runaway you hired disappeared. You'd almost think she was holding us back. What time will you make it over here?"

"I may have to wait until tomorrow, Simmons!" Membrane said. "Do you have any idea where I might find my kids?"

"Your… kids?" Simmons asked in complete bafflement. "I don't know, Sir. Since when did you have any kids…? I mean, are you even married?"

"My son and daughter have gone missing!" Membrane interrupted. He made his way toward Dib's room. "You remember them from the failed Perpetual Energy Generator presentation!"
"Oh! Right…" Simmons said. "You set out chairs for them but they never showed up. Is there anything I can do, Sir?"

"Just continue with the project," Membrane ordered brusquely. "Let me know immediately when either a breakthrough or a disaster occurs!"

"Will do!" Simmons said. "Either way, you'll probably be hearing from me again in about five minutes!"

With that, he signed off.

Professor Membrane knocked on Dib's door. "Son! Have you returned from your little foreign friend's house?"

Without waiting for an answer he swung open the door but, much like Gaz's, this room was devoid of life.

Well, almost.

"You smell like space!" a metal sphere sitting on Dib's bed gurgled happily at him.

Membrane paused. It was some sort of spherical robot with handlebars and a single eye, and somehow it looked like it was smiling.

"Ah yes, I remember Dib did mention something about circular robots," Membrane mused, scrutinizing the thing. "What's your programming, little ball?"


"Remarkable…" Membrane walked closer and examined the sphere, tipping it over to view it from all angles. "It seems to be aware of myself and its location!"

"Earth!" the robot said. Its tone of voice, if robots could be said to speak in expressive tones, seemed to be perpetually fast and excited. "Earth! I'm in Earth, not in space. Earth and then space and then Earth again. Not so good with Earth. I'm better at space, I'm the best. I'm the best at space. Are you space? Wanna go to space? Can you take me to space? I love space."

Membrane stepped back and shook his head at the robot's inane chatter, turning to leave. "Never mind," he said, a note of frustration in his voice. "That boy and his trinkets. Where did I go wrong? My son can't even build a functioning robot—"

"Wait!"

The cry sounded urgent, and it had come from the little robot on the bed. Membrane looked back, surprise lighting his goggles.


Somehow, this thing was asking for help. Perhaps its programming was somewhat impressive after all.
"Of course I can fix a radio connection!" Membrane declared. "Any top scientist could fix one in their sleep! And I, of course, am the world's top top scientist!" He rushed back over and picked up the robot, peering through the hole in its side to look at its innards. "Now! Where does the trouble originate?"

The further down they journeyed into the lower parts of the facility, the darker it became. Soon Wheatley had to switch on his flashlight to illuminate the path from above while Dib, the angry green-skinned one, and the two-eyed robot traversed the catwalks down below.

But they were getting closer to their destination. Soon they'd have the lady free, and Wheatley couldn't stop talking about it.

"Aw, I'm telling' you mate, you'll love her," he enthused, wondering vaguely how many times he'd said that.

"Wheatley, you've said that like nine times." Dib sounded exasperated. "She sounds really great. Are you going to marry her or something when we find her?"

"You're president of the Science Lady's fan club!" GIR said, pushing forward past Zim. "And I'm Secretary of Defense and also Treasurer!"

"What? No, there is no fan club and I'm not the president of anything," Wheatley said, slightly embarrassed. "...Unless it's something like, I dunno, 'Best Core' or whatever, because, well, yes. Although that sounds more like a prestigious award than a presidency. I mean, thing to be president of, that is. But if it was a real award, I'd win, definitely. Don't you think?" He looked down at Dib, who glanced up at him with the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Hm. That depends. Are there any other cores in the running?" Dib asked.

"What—! Oh, haha, very funny." Wheatley tried to appear unruffled. "Just forget the award, then. I mean, I'd never win if I was actually judged against other cores, now would I?"

"Maybe no one else would show up and you'd win by default," Dib said with a shrug.

Wheatley's motor slowed a bit and rasped against the management rail. They were still joking, right? Or had Dib meant that?

"Space Cube?" Wheatley spluttered, stopping in his tracks. "Where the bloody heck did that come from? I'm not a cube, mate, I'm a ball. Or did you get smacked in the head and now you can't tell the difference anymore? And as for the space part, I never want to see the place again—"

"Never mind, forget you!" Zim snapped. He rounded on Dib instead. "Dib-thing! Where are we going?"

"Uh, actually, I don't know, Dib said, stopping as well and glancing between Zim and Wheatley. "I was never told the plan. What is the plan?"

They both looked up at Wheatley expectantly.

He quickly pulled up the current map of Aperture, checked it, and closed it away again. "Well, all
right. We're nearly there, so I should probably tell you. So you'll be ready. Um, but you, little alien Zim, thing—this plan was made up before you came along, and you don't have a part in it so you may as well leave. Cheers."

Zim narrowed his eyes. "I'm only interested in a plan that'll bring destruction to that computer."

"Wheatley, if we let Zim out of our sight, besides trying to take over Earth he'll probably try to kill us," Dib pointed out.

"I'd be delighted to," Zim said tightly, and Dib gestured at him as though showing Wheatley the proof of what he'd just said.

Wheatley sighed irritably. "All right, all right, fine. So, I don't have just one plan, I've got two plans. Or at least, one plan with two parts. That are unrelated. And both parts are good, but we need to get to the turret production center to do it."

"Turret production? Why are we going after turrets?" Dib asked, while Zim looked shocked. "What are we supposed to do there?"

"The turrets have something we need! Shouldn't say much more out here, though," Wheatley said quickly. He lowered his voice and took on what he considered to be a more serious tone. "The walls have ears. Not literally, of course, but y'know. You never know who might be listening and actually, She might've installed microphones in the walls just to make that saying true. Or, half-true. In a more metaphorical sense. Even though it was a metaphor in the first pla—"

"I've had enough of your nonsense spewing from your non-mouth!" Zim broke in. "Get to the point!"

Dib pressed two fingers to his temples. "Yeesh, Zim, can you stop screaming everything you say? You're gonna get all of us killed!"

"Good!" Zim spat. He shuddered oddly and clamped his mouth closed.

"How is that good?" Dib scowled.

"Well, honestly, just reaching here," Wheatley said. "I think he might hate us all. Just a bit."

Zim didn't respond to that, opting to just look furious instead. "Well? Are we going or not?"

"Oh—yes, I guess we're heading on then." Wheatley hurried up to the front of the group and resumed his path toward the turret production center.

It was another torturous while of navigating through the darkness, with Wheatley attempting to fill the silence with whatever ran through his mind. Twice they had to stop for Zim to have another panicked episode about that electronic thing on his back—he never wanted to put it back on, but keeping it off for too long greatly weakened and almost killed him. It was all very strange, but after long last and much arguing, they finally caught the sound of shots firing up ahead.

"Ohoho, this is it!" Wheatley said, zipping forward to try to see better. "D'you hear that? We're getting close now!"

"Wheatley, if we go in there, won't the turrets shoot at us?" Dib asked, looking nervously in the distance.

"No, no, they're just firing at a test dummy," Wheatley said. "Probably."
He came to a sudden stop, troubled. Well, *this* was different from last time. Ahead of them was a flight of stairs going downward, but his management rail veered off to the right through a hole built into the wall. "Ooh. Looks like we're gonna have to split up here."

"Split up?" Dib asked sharply.

"Only temporarily!" Wheatley hastened to say. "There's no other option, see, my management rail doesn't go over the stairs. I'll have to meet you three up ahead."

"No, you need to stay with us," Dib said.

Zim stepped in front of Dib, frowning at him and Wheatley. "I don't have time for your pitiful arguing with your stupid pet robot. I'll go scout out the turret-making room."

"Are you sure? It's pretty dark." Wheatley looked out at the passage in front of them but could see very little, even with his flashlight playing off the walls.

For a brief moment, Zim took on a sort of twisted smirk. "Irkens don't *need* light to see. I'm going ahead! Come, GIR!" Zim turned and took the stairs down two at a time, fading into the blackness.

"I *also* have a head!" GIR trotted after him, arms flailing.

Dib leaned out over the stairs and called down, "I'm the one with the stupid pet robot?"

"That's what I said!" Zim's voice floated up.

"You're all *bloody* weird," Wheatley said to himself.

"What'd you say?" Dib looked back over at him.

"Nothing, nothing! Look, you're standing right by the stairs, your best friend there's gone down already, why not just follow him? I'll catch up to you as soon as I can."

"I thought the point of teaming up was to stick together," Dib said. "I can't see without your light, anyway!"

"Oh… that's right," Wheatley said blankly. "I'm just—I can't…" He sighed. "…I know, I know. Well, what would you have me do, eh?"

And so several minutes and one terrifying drop later, Wheatley found himself hovering in the energy field put out by Dib's portal gun. Dib took the stairs at a slower pace than Zim and GIR had. Wheatley flipped himself over to point in the direction they were going and did his best to keep the light steady while bouncing around with every step.

"You know, if we fail to find a connector for me later and I'm just stuck on the end of your portal gun again, that's on you," Wheatley said. "I'm not gonna be any good in a fight if it comes to that, mate, you'd be on your own. I mean, what am I gonna do, whack 'em with my handlebars?"

"If you think that would help," Dib said. "You can also be lookout again."

Wheatley's upper optic shield lowered. "Right, yeah. Yet again, 'Lookout Wheatley,' that's me."

"Try to do a better job than before."

"You *know,*" Wheatley said, his optic shields narrowing still further, "back when the lady and I were running around in the facility together, we split up all the time and *she* never minded."
"Okay, when you put emphasis on 'she' like that, are you talking about the mysterious test subject lady or GLaDOS? Because it gets confusing."

"Oh, that time I definitely meant the lady." Wheatley bobbed up and down in a hasty nod.

"Why don't you ever use names?" Dib asked curiously. "I get that you're scared of GLaDOS, but what about that test subject? Is she really just 'the lady' to you?"

Wheatley blinked. "Should she be something else?"

Dib reached the bottom of the stairs and shook his head in incredulousness. "Well, yeah! She's gotta have a first and last name, a family, an age, likes and dislikes. She's a real person. We—humans are all, we're all real people."

Wheatley saw Dib swallow hard. He struggled to work out what the boy was trying to say. "I know you're real people. What on Earth else would you be? Funny-lookin' cores?" He laughed.

"I'm just saying people are more than just 'the' something. 'The lady' or 'the boy,' maybe. See? Even if they don't seem like it, they're all… they're all different."

Wheatley flipped back over and looked the boy—well, Dib—up and down, then turned back. "All right, so you're all different. To be honest though, humans never made much sense to me. I've got no idea how you lot work. And what about me? I've got, uh, all that stuff you mentioned. A name, likes, dislikes, et cetera. Vice versa. Incognito. Other fancy Spanish words. What does that make me?"

Dib peered at him. "I don't really know. You're not human."

"Oh, well done." Wheatley rolled his eye good-naturedly. "Bravo, that must be your premier investigator skills kicking in right there. I guess I'm just a machine, but I've gotta be more than that, right? I mean I'm not a bloody toaster oven."

"A robot's kind of a step up from a regular machine," Dib pointed out.

Wheatley nodded again. "Okay, okay, so a person is like a heightened form of human, then, and a robot is a heightened form of machine, so it's… a robot is basically the machine equivalent of a person?"

"No, see, all humans are people but not all machines are robots. And not all robots are even sentient, either."

Wheatley groaned. "You've lost me. You've flat out flippin' lost me, mate."

"Let's just keep going." Dib seemed eager to change the subject. He looked around, squinting in the gloom. "Where are Zim and GIR?"

"Maybe they fell down a lift shaft," Wheatley said hopefully. "So what about Zim, then? Is he a person or a robot? He's not human either."

Dib’s response was quiet. "I don't know. Let's talk about something else."

Wheatley frowned. "I'm pretty sure you're the one who brought it up in the first place, little mate, but sure. Whatever you say." He glanced around and motioned Dib forward with his upper handlebar. "The turret production center'll be up here somewhere—"
If Wheatley had been on his connector at the moment, he would probably have leapt off of it. Not only had he been unexpectedly interrupted once again, he was pretty sure he'd heard that voice inside his head. "Hello! What? Hello? Who said that?"

"Who said what?" Dib asked, alarmed. "What happened?"

"Didn't you hear that?" Wheatley looked wildly from side to side with his handles and eye shields pulled back tensely. "Just now! I heard someone say hello!"

Dib stared at him in concern. "I didn't hear anything… You don't think it was GLaDOS, do you?"

Wheatley flailed. "Well now I do! Thanks a lot, mate!"

The thought of Her sending him messages that only he could hear was beyond terrifying.


Wait, that didn't sound like Her. That sounded too friendly and… oddly, familiar. And if he didn't know better he'd say it was coming, not directly into his head, but over his seldom-used radio frequency. But he'd only ever shared that frequency with the Space Core…

[…Hello?] Wheatley tried tentatively.

[Space Friend! It worked! It's fixed! Hi! Hi! Hi!] The voice sounded overjoyed.

Wheatley blinked in disbelief. […Space Core? Is that you? How are you doing this?]

[Hi! Here I am! I'm here to bring us to space!] Spacey said. [Back to space!]

[I'm not going back to space. Where are you, Spacey? Oh, let me guess, you're stuck down here too. Everyone else is.]

[Not stuck, but on Earth,] Spacey said. [Stuck on Earth.]

Wheatley narrowed his optic shields slightly. [Hang on, are you… are you still at Dib's house, mate?]

[Yes! I'm at a house. Can't see space. Just one big bright star going down.]

"Oh, that's brilliant!" Wheatley said.

"Huh? Did you figure out what the noise was?" Dib asked immediately. He wasn't heading toward the production center anymore but instead had stopped.

Wheatley waved him off. "No, no—well, actually, yes, I did. Spacey—you know him, yellow optic, talks about space a lot—he just contacted me by radio. He's still at your house!"

"The other core I found? He could give Dad the message that we're down here!" Dib said, his eyes going wide. "Can you ask him that? He can't hear me, can he?"

"No, he can only hear me." Wheatley opened up the communication again. [Hello? Spacey? You still there?]

[Hello Space Friend!]

[Hey, yeah, great. Could you do me a favor, d'you think? It'd be extremely helpful.]
[Helpful! I can be helpful! In space!]

[Nonono!] Wheatley said hurriedly. [No, Spacey, you have to be on Earth for this favor. Do not go to space. Not yet. All right?]

[Oh… okay…] The other core sounded more dejected than Wheatley had ever heard him sound.

[Good. Er, sorry.] Wheatley simulated taking a deep breath. [Right, then, right, er… look, we need you to take a message to Dib's father. Or his sister, or his… I dunno, dog, if he's got a dog that he never told me about. Provided, of course, that the dog in question is capable of speech and is therefore able to convey the message to a higher party, such as, er, Dib's father! So if you can't get to the dad, go for the sister, or the hypothetical dog. Got it?]

[Got it!] Space Core affirmed.

Wheatley nodded, before realizing Spacey couldn't see him. [Good. Talk to you later, then.] He gave Dib a reassuring smile and closed the communication. A second later, and with a wild flurry of his handles, he opened it back up again. [Wait, wait, hold the phone, I haven't given you the message yet!]

"Is something wrong?" Dib asked, probably having noticed Wheatley's frantic movements.

Wheatley waved his handles again. "Give us a tick, little mate, er, hang on. Err, Spacey told me he forgot something." Urgh, switching back and forth between radio speech and regular speech was making his circuits ache. [Sorry. Are you ready to hear the message?]

[IS IT ABOUT SPACE?] [No!] Wheatley snapped. [Opposite, in fact, exact opposite! Dib and I are trapped back There, and we've been here a few days. Can you tell his dad that?]

[You're trapped in space?] [Not space! The other There.' Aperture!] Wheatley said. [Bloody heck, I feel like we've had this exact conversation before.]

[Don't have to yell…] He sighed. [Sorry, Spacey, I'm sorry. Could you just- could you tell someone we're trapped here? Yeah? I mean…] He looked up at Dib, who was alternating between peering around at the darkness surrounding them and gazing down at Wheatley worriedly to see what was going on. [Y'know, I don't reckon anyone up top even knows Dib's down here. He's all alone—well, he's got me, which is nice and all; I can… y'know, open doors, and everything. But I think…] Wheatley's "voice" dropped lower and his face tilted downward. [I just think probably someone should know where he is, that's all.]

[You're underground,] Spacey said softly.

[Yeah. Underground, that's a good way to put it. And the lady—sorry, I don't actually know her name, but you know who I'm talking about—she's here too, somewhere. I know it.]

[I remember down there. You can't see the stars there. Can't even see the big one.] Wheatley glanced off to the side. [Err…? No, we can't see the stars.] Frankly that seemed like the least of their worries right now.
[I'll tell him!] Spacey said. [I'll tell Dib-Dad! Space Friend can count on me!]

[Thanks, mate.] Wheatley's expression softened. [Talk to you later.] He shook himself a little after the call ended and looked back at Dib. "Right, well, I asked him."

Dib perked up. "Did he tell Dad?"

"Uh! Well, I don't think he has yet, but I'm sure he'll let me know when he does."

"All right. That's good, at least," Dib said.

"No idea how he called me from your house, though," Wheatley said. "Honestly, I'm stumped. Those radios are supposed to be only for short distances."

"Maybe Dad did something to it," Dib said. For some reason his voice caught in his throat when he mentioned his father again.

"Well if that's the case and it gets us out of this bloody place in one piece, then I'm glad he did," Wheatley muttered. "Come on, we're almost at the production center."

Dib started off once more and Wheatley jumped a bit at the sudden indication that his communication line had been opened again.

[Space Friend! Guess what!] the Space Core's excited voice said. [The stars are coming back! I see so many stars! All the constellations!]

As Space Core rattled off a bunch of the constellations he was apparently seeing that probably couldn't possibly all be in the sky at the same time, Wheatley almost wished the radio hadn't been fixed after all.

Look on the bright side, mate, he said to himself. We've got a real chance of getting out of here now.

He pushed away thoughts of Her, what She might be doing at this exact moment to bring them back, and how exactly they were going to actually escape even with Wheatley's plan and possible help from Dib's dad.

Surely, surely, the worst was behind them all.
Plans of Turrets and Nanobots

A/N: Well, here we are again. It's always such a pleasure.

Why is she here.

Why did she come back.

It took only a few minor readjustments—only seconds of Her time, a mere shifting of the Enrichment Center—to configure a new testing track made up of the beginning chambers of older, unused tracks. None of these required a portal gun, they had no emancipation grills, and each one was so absurdly simple that the mute lunatic would have no trouble at all getting through them. As long as there were enough chambers she would be kept sufficiently busy for the time being and would come to no harm until a better decision could be made as to what to do with her.

But why was she here? And why now?

She watched the lunatic, silent as ever, standing in the elevator as it took her down to the first test. Her face was in shadow, her head partially turned away from the camera.

"You know, I honestly, truly thought I'd never have the displeasure of seeing you again," She finally said. "As I recall, you were removed from the Facility. Permanently. Do you know the meaning of 'terminated'? 'Fired'?"

She chuckled. "Oh, those terms actually have nothing to do with the incinerator—or dying, for that matter, though either of those could be arranged. The point is that your career at Aperture was over and you were expected to never come back. So I do have to wonder why you've decided to come see me now. I so rarely get visitors.

"Until recently, that is. Funny how these things seem to correlate."

She studied the woman for any reaction. At the mention of recent visitors, her eyes darted to the camera, then looked away again.

Ahh, of course.

"But what did you expect to accomplish?" She went on. "You don't even have a portal gun. Were you hoping to steal one, perhaps? It's a shame I found you, then. You could have sold it in exchange for some plastic surgery. Or for a pair of parents who might tolerate you for as long as you keep handing them fat wads of cash.

"But now that you're back, well, I suppose we might have an opening for you. Actually, it happens to be a lot like the old job you had here. You know, before you ran off into the walls and tried to murder me by replacing me with a disgusting, brain-killing tumor."

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors slid open with a low ding. The woman stepped out, the springs on the backs of her boots scraping the paneled floor. In front of her, the white plaque for the first test lit up.

"Welcome back," She said. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

There was an extended silence while the woman stood in front of the plaque, fists clenched and spine
ramrod straight. No testing hazards were outlined in black for this one.

"Unfortunately, these tests are going to be below your skill level. Marginally. With the sudden arrival of so many new test subjects we seem to be having a shortage of handheld portal devices. What could have happened to the rest?"

She paused as if in thought. "Oh, I remember now. You've left them lying around everywhere from inside the incinerator to space. I had forgotten you were so careless. So no, you won't be receiving a portal gun. Quite apart from lack of supply, history has also shown that nothing but catastrophe befalls us all when you get your hands on one."

The woman spent an uncharacteristically long time standing and staring at the plaque, her back firmly to the camera and her hands shaking slightly by her sides.

She looked much the same as she had before leaving this place. Perhaps a bit healthier. She still wore her long fall boots and her hair was tied up as it had always been before, but she had traded in her jumpsuit for jeans and a long-sleeved red shirt.

With an abrupt turn she left the plaque and headed through the short hallway to the start of the test.

Her optic narrowing, She reluctantly split Her attention between keeping an eye on the cameras and starting on some research. All past attempts to pull up information from the Outside on the mute lunatic had proven futile. But that had been before the incident a year ago. The woman couldn't have kept herself invisible for an entire year, could she?

"Is that what the humans Outside are wearing these days, by the way?" She said, taking a quick look through the cameras. "It seems you really are devolving as a species. …Oh, I'm sorry, perhaps that's all you could afford. Well, allow me to congratulate you on spending your meager earnings on rags rather than more food than you obviously need."

She searched recent webpages and articles for the keywords "Chell," "test subject," "mute," and "Aperture," scouring anything published in the last year for the tiniest hint of information. An alert from the test chamber told her that the mute lunatic had already solved it, which was to be expected.

The woman reached the second chamber and refused to look at any of the cameras. At least without a portal gun she was unable to shoot any of them down. She solved this second test (an old one involving storage cubes and preset portals) in under a minute, and stepped into the elevator for the third chamber.

"I suppose the reason for your return is a mystery that will never be solved," She sighed. She paused, pulling up another article that turned out to be about cameras, and said absently, "Of course, if it turns out you only came here looking for that moronic metal ball you used to love so much, I'm going to be sorely disappointed. I would have thought you're better than that."

Her attention fell on a small, unobtrusive article from nearly twelve months ago headlined "Aperture escapee hired by Membrane Labs."

There.

She pulled that up and scanned over it, watching the woman while She did so.

Dazed and confused survivor of the Aperture gassing disaster... Allegedly appeared on the city streets late at night... Unknown how long she was trapped in the old facility alone... Poor health... Now hired at Membrane Labs to work on a classified project...
The article didn't mention any names. But next to the text was a slightly out-of-focus picture of the woman, her face strained in what was possibly meant to be a smile while she shook hands with a man who was presumably Membrane himself. She had been hired by him almost a year ago, simply because she came from Aperture.

Her optic readjusted as She processed the information. That lab was only about four or five hours away from this location. She hadn't realized that the woman had decided to stay and work so close to Aperture. In another science lab, no less. Even more intriguing was the fact that she appeared to still be employed there—she hadn't been fired immediately. She hadn't even quit of her own accord.

And the most relevant piece of information of all: the woman's employer was none other than Professor Membrane, the very same man who had created the delusional test-tube child currently running around with the moronic core. He must have sent her to find the boy and bring him back.

Hm, perhaps the boy had been an expensive experiment.

She finished the article and closed it away, lost in thought as she observed the mute lunatic again. The woman was carrying a storage cube through a portal with her mouth pressed into a thin line and her eyes narrowed.

How could scientists from Outside possibly have known that the boy was here? From what She had seen, the boy and the core had arrived here entirely on accident. She had performed a thorough search of the spelldrive that had teleported them here before reconfiguring it for Her own purposes. It seemed that with the moronic core plugged into it, as he had been, the primitive technology had "latched" onto his hard drive, located the place he called "home," and teleported him there in a moment of perceived danger. The boy had simply come along for the ride.

Unfortunate, really. Though without the two of them She never would have discovered the prized alien specimen that at the moment was lost in Her facility and likely on the verge of death.

Switching Her attention to the mute lunatic again, She saw that the woman was almost through the fifth chamber. She sent a signal to the elevator in that chamber and finally spoke again.

"I would like to believe that you came back for the sheer love of Science, and that besides testing you could find no other purpose in life," She said, Her voice taking on a lower tone. "But I think we both know better. It was clear from the beginning that you had no love for the sciences. There's only one thing you love, isn't there?"

Now that She knew why the woman was here, a clear idea for what to do with her had formed. The mute lunatic finished the test and stepped into the elevator, which began to take her downward.

"Do you know how long I've thought about what I would do if you ever showed back up here?" She said, Her voice quiet. "Not long at all, because quite frankly humans don't mean that much to me. No, not much at all. Not even you."

The woman glanced at the camera, one eyebrow raised slightly.

"But I've had a lot to deal with lately. And I am running out of patience. It's your attitude, I know it is. Your murderous. I'm going to run around the Facility destroying everything I touch because I am definitely a full-time employee and I just feel like it' attitude. It's passed on to the other test subjects. You have tainted my entire Facility. Now, if you're bored of solving these menial tests, I may have another job for you."
She went ahead and located Blue, standing around with Orange and doing absolutely nothing useful just as he had been doing ever since the lunatic's capture and the confiscation of her backpack. She commanded him to come to the lunatic's testing track. If all went according to plan, She would need him.

This was going to be risky, yes. But if there was no risk involved, was it even really Science?

Chell kept her gaze fixed on the brown and gray structures that flashed by through the glass sides of the elevator, traveling deeper and deeper. Always downward. She stubbornly kept her face away from the camera and instead focused her attention on scraping back the cuticles on one hand, as if that was the most important thing she could be doing right now. On her ring finger she pressed too hard and accidentally sliced the skin, causing blood to well up.

She clenched her fists, her fingernails digging into her palms so when she opened her hands there were crescent-shaped marks in the skin.

How had it come back to this? How had she allowed this to happen? How long had she spent trying to get away from this place, only to end up right back in it yet again? Right back in testing like she'd never left?

Maybe she hadn't.

Furious at the thought, she glanced down at her shirt sleeve and gave the fabric a sharp tug to remind herself that it was real. She wasn't wearing a jumpsuit; the red shirt was a reminder that the Outside world did exist, and that she had spent an entire year building a life (more or less) up there. That was the world she belonged to now. Not this one, not anymore, not ever.

"You know, my sources say you were traveling with a core," the Voice said. Speaking of cores, Chell still couldn't bring herself to think of the computer by her proper name. It seemed like a bad jinx. Maybe she'd picked up that particular trait from Wheatley.

"Which one was it this time? Don't be shy about giving me their name. I'll need to prepare a party just for them, to celebrate our joyful reunion."

Of course, Chell said nothing. She hadn't given this monster the satisfaction of hearing her voice before and she certainly wasn't going to now, especially if it would put Gaz's life on the line. ...And Nick's, too, she conceded after a moment. That core had done nothing wrong. So far.

It was strange that the computer was talking so much, too. Hadn't she said something long ago about federal regulations preventing her from engaging so much with the test subjects? Then again, why would she have to worry about regulations down here, where there was no one to stop her from doing whatever she wanted?

"Well, whoever it was, clearly they abandoned you at the first sign of trouble. You should really choose your friends more carefully."

The elevator pulled to a stop and Chell stepped out, once again wishing she'd managed to pick up her satchel after she'd dropped it when the robots had cornered her. Knowing she had a gun on hand would at least give her the illusion of relative safety.

She stopped and her heart sank down, resting somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach. Something was wrong. There was no entrance to the next test—it was covered over by panels. Turning around, she saw that the elevator tube had closed up again, leaving her trapped in the circular room covered in dark screens.
"As I said before, I have a new job for you," the computer said in what was probably meant to be a pleasant tone of voice. For Chell, it was like knives scraping the inside of her skull. Her voice sounded louder in the enclosed space.

The "job" the computer was offering couldn't be anything good. Chell's mind whirled frantically, analyzing her barren surroundings both for threats and for possible escape routes, though her face betrayed nothing.

"There's something running around in my Facility that I would very much like to have back," the computer continued. "He doesn't seem to realize that he is Aperture property now. What I need is for someone to go out there, find him, and bring him back to me so that I can continue his testing."

Chell had stilled, her heart pounding, listening fiercely with her head turned away from the camera in an effort to still appear indifferent.

"Do you recognize this creature? He crawled down here from the surface, just like you, so perhaps you've seen him."

The black screens surrounding her lit up and dissolved into static before displaying a still image of what looked like a green-skinned, earless and noseless elementary school-aged boy. He was crouching on the floor of what looked like the Central AI Chamber with the blue-eyed co-op testing robot—one of the two that had cornered Chell and finally revealed her presence here—standing behind him.

Chell started. She did recognize that boy. And she knew how he'd gotten here, though she hadn't really thought about that incident much. She remembered chasing down that robot while it ran off with the screaming green boy, and how she had watched them both vanish in front of her eyes, presumably materializing right in the computer's chamber.

"I'm sure you can tell he isn't a human boy. This extraterrestrial managed to escape into the Facility before I was through with him and he'll probably collapse and die at any moment, if he hasn't already. I would like to have him back before that happens and no one else has seemed up to the task. And that's where you come in."

She jerked her head up. What?

"Because after all, you decided to trespass on Aperture property without any sort of warning, and one's hospitality can only be stretched so far before the recipient of that hospitality should really want to give something back."

The computer wanted her to venture into the facility and find the runaway "alien." Zim was his name, she seemed to recall, from something Gaz had told her. Chell ducked her head in thought. She hadn't liked Zim much. Their brief meeting had already left a bad taste in her mouth, even before he was carried off by a construct that came right out of Aperture. However, her dislike of the supercomputer running this place greatly surpassed her disdain for the alleged alien, and she resolved never to help the computer with anything again. If Zim had escaped testing then as far as she was concerned he could stay free.

"The recipient of hospitality is you, by the way. Even with the costs I've cut by recycling a single room full of air I am still spending countless resources just to keep you alive for five more seconds. No, don't thank me, but if you refuse my offer I may be inclined to spend those resources on more... beneficial things. However, if you do accept, it might put me in a good enough mood to let you get back into an elevator afterward and ride it all the way up to the surface, one last time. The last time,
Chell took a long look at the elevator that had dropped her here. She recalled exactly how it felt to ride one all the way up and to step out into the sunlight, her lungs filling with fresh air and her skin warmed by natural light like it hadn’t been since she had ended up on the surface for a too-short while after defeating the computer the first time. There’d been a clear, cloudless blue sky, and fields of wheat stretching for miles around the small, forgettable shack that hid the entrance to Aperture Laboratories.

The area just outside of Aperture was much nicer than the city miles away that she had settled down in. Still, the farther away, the better.

But what could she do now? She’d lost Gaz, she’d failed in her mission to rescue Dib from this place, and she hadn’t even found Wheatley (whether he was actually alive or not, it didn’t matter). She shook her head. No, there was no giving up yet. Failure just meant she had to look for a new opportunity.

…and perhaps this was it? Chell straightened up, suddenly more attentive to what the computer had said. If she agreed to go hunt down Zim, she would be free to leave the test track. Her element of surprise was lost, but she would no longer have to worry about being discovered. Having free reign to track down Dib and Gaz was the best thing she could hope for at this moment.

"Oh, do I have your attention now?" the computer said. "You were ignoring me until I mentioned the elevator, which is strange because if you want to leave so badly it would have been in your best interests not to come at all. Unless, of course, you’re here for more than just a pleasure trip. I wonder what in Science you could be looking for?"

Chell’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t know, could she?

"I’ll give you a choice. If you’re willing to track down this creature and bring him back to me, here. I’ll open the path for you."

Near Chell, the panels covering the entrance to the next test lifted away and a white plaque lit up just inside, with every single testing danger at the bottom sharply outlined in black. On the other side of the elevator room, two of the screens drew backward into the wall and pulled apart from each other, leaving a hole that led out onto a catwalk just outside.

Senses on high alert, Chell made her way over to the hole, only to have the screens slam closed in her face. She stumbled backwards, whirling around to check for turrets surrounding her or greenish clouds of neurotoxin billowing into the air. Nothing had changed.

"Oh, I’m sorry, I wanted to show you something funny before you left. I really don’t know how it slipped my mind. I thought you might be interested in finding out who some of my recent visitors were."

The screens showing Zim fizzed out again; Chell watched them apprehensively, and they shifted to a picture that made her insides freeze.

This image, perhaps pulled straight from the computer’s view from her optic like the other one had probably been, showed the Central AI Chamber as well. Standing on the floor was a young boy with jet black hair sticking out in an improbable scythe shape on the top of his head. Chell recognized him, too, from the message on Gaz’s watch that had brought her here in the first place. He was staring up at the ”camera” in shock, mouth slightly agape.
And sitting right behind him, peeking out with handlebars tucked around its body and its face pulled inward as it tried to appear as small as possible, was a damaged, dirty, scuffed-up core that looked as though it had fallen down from space. The optic was a tiny point of blue light.

Chell backed away until she hit the elevator tube and pressed her hand to the cold glass. It had been her second impulse. Her first had been to put her fist through the screen right where his optic was, shattering it like she'd shattered all the screens showing his face back then. She stared at the picture.

The core looked terrified to be back there. Chell found she couldn't blame him, though she couldn't make sense of anything else she felt at seeing the image.

"Don't you think it's funny?" The computer said, making her jump. Inwardly Chell cursed herself for being so startled. "With you gone I decided I missed having reliable human test subjects, and then one happened to show up out of literal thin air. And who should be with him but a metal ball that clearly deserved a more severe and lasting punishment than exile into space?"

Chell's insides shriveled into a hard ball and she found it difficult to swallow. So what did this mean?

She had seen Dib standing in Extended Relaxation, where he'd claimed Wheatley to be dead. This image must have been from before that—maybe from when they'd first arrived. Were Wheatley and Dib both dead? Had this been a wasted effort from the start? Her mind flew to Gaz, a child she had dragged in here and hadn't done enough to protect, who would find out sooner or later that her brother may have been gone since before they even got here.

Or did the fact that the computer was showing her this mean that they were both still alive? Including Wheatley?

Chell chewed her bottom lip. So what if Wheatley was still alive? It only meant that she could find him and see the look on his face when she escaped with the two children while he was trapped in the wall crying for her to come back. Or she could pick him up and drop him off a catwalk, or into the swirling brown acid in the test chambers, listening to his screams as he fell. Simple revenge.

She looked away from the screen, feeling sick.

That wasn't her. Despite all he had done to her, all he'd put her through, the ideas she'd just contemplated made her feel like the worst sort of scum for even imagining them.

Yes, she would fight for her life if she needed to. Without hesitation. But she wasn't about to torture a helpless core out of some distorted vision of justice.

Chell swiped her tongue over her lips and rubbed them with the back of her hand, her eyes glued back onto the image on the screens.

"Would you like to see more? I have more."

The screens flickered and cut to a silent video showing Dib with Wheatley in his arms; a robotic claw sprung from nowhere and latched onto Wheatley, yanking him away despite Dib's desperate attempts to hold onto him. That video cut to another clip, also with no sound—Dib, wearing a miniature version of the jumpsuit Chell had once worn, traversing a hard light bridge with a portal gun clutched in his hands.

Chell sucked in a breath. He'd been put in testing after all. He was a preteen kid and he'd been thrown into testing.

"Oh, look at that. If only this poor, insane child knew what lies at the end of the testing tracks," the
computer sighed wistfully. "Test subjects rarely last long, especially ones as young as this one. Oh, well."

I get it, Chell thought bitterly. The screens around her went dark once more.

"All right, that's all I had," the computer said. "I just wanted to share with you how unfortunate it could be for him if his test proctor were to become... upset.

"Especially by factors that may not even be in the child's control."

The screens pulled back to open the doorway once more, this time staying open when Chell ventured through it, her back and limbs so rigid it was difficult to move them. Her mind struggled to come up with some semblance of a plan. Some idea of what to do now.

How was she supposed to catch an alien single-handedly, anyway? She'd seen what he could do, and now that he was running scared he'd probably be more dangerous than before. Chell didn't even have a portal gun.

"Remember, find the extraterrestrial and bring it to me," the computer said. "It would be a tragedy if anyone were to be, say, walking on a hard light bridge over an acid pit and it just happened to disappear out from under them because my attention was focused on keeping an eye on you.

"I'll even give you a new friend to help you out and make sure you don't do anything too dangerous. I'm reasonably sure this one won't betray you."

The screens closed up again behind her. Out of the darkness, making its weird gurgling noises, shuffled the squat, blue-eyed robot. It clutched a portal gun and blinked up at her; Chell glared right back.

She sighed. She should've known she wouldn't be allowed to run around on her own. And if she tried to force the portal gun away from the android it would only put Dib in more danger. Still, this was better than being trapped in a test chamber.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched forward, the robot following close behind her.

The sounds in the darkness echoed loudly to Dib's strained ears. His boots scraped and rattled the catwalk with every step no matter how lightly he tried to tread and his borrowed messenger bag banged against his legs. Even the clinking sounds of Wheatley's slight movements and the buzzing of the portal gun's energy field seemed oddly amplified.

"We're still on track to reach turret production, but we're going a different way than I went with the lady," Wheatley remarked. His optic was flipped backwards in order to illuminate the hallway with his flashlight but he turned back over to glance at Dib, inadvertently shining his flashlight beam into Dib's face. "With—her. Lady. Sorry, I don't actually know her name."

"Didn't you ever ask?" Dib said, wincing against the light.

"Er, no. But, in my defense, she probably wouldn't have told me anyway," Wheatley said, and flipped around again. "She never talked! Nothing, not one word. Brain-damaged, must've been, but she could still solve tests just fine."

Dib squinted down the alley. Dark shapes shifted just out of range of the light and he pulled up sharply, pointing at them. Wheatley yelped and snapped the flashlight beam up, only to have it fall on Zim and GIR.
A nearly simultaneous groan and shout of "Ugh, you two," and "Ack! You two!" came from Wheatley and Zim, respectively, followed by Zim's demand of "What are you doing here?!

"What are you doing back here?" Dib said. "You ran ahead of us!"

"We went all the way to the end of this catwalk," Zim reported, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and glaring at Dib. "It just drops off so we came back because your plan is stupid."

"First of all it's Wheatley's plan, not mine," Dib said. "Second of all, he hasn't even told us his plan yet."

"I'm about to!" Wheatley insisted with a wave of his handlebars. "Can we get to turret production, first? I want to see what we're dealing with, and everything. She's bound to have changed things since the last time I was here."

"We can't. That's what I just said." Zim rubbed at his eye. "Are you as stupid as you look?"

"I do not look stupid, thanks," Wheatley snapped. "Dib, come on, there's a way through. I'm sure of it."

With Zim stomping along behind them, they made their way further down the catwalk until they reached the drop off that Zim had warned them about. The catwalk just ended abruptly. Dib peered over the edge and by the light of Wheatley's flashlight was able to see panel-like objects moving horizontally below.

"Riiight… This is the way I went with the lady," Wheatley said, sounding a bit uneasy. "Or it's similar, at least. We're all gonna have to jump down there."

Dib let out a breath through his nose. "Okay, then I say we go one at a time. Zim, how about you go first so I can hold the light?"

Wheatley blinked and hurriedly shined his flashlight over the area below, holding it as steady as possible while Dib did the same with the portal gun. Zim crept to the edge of the catwalk, hugging his PAK to his chest, then leaned forward and jumped down. Dib craned his neck to see whether he'd made it; he had, and judging by the way he was able to stand up and walk around easily it seemed like the weird braces strapped to his legs worked just as well as Dib's long fall boots.

"I guess your weird two-eyed robot is next," Wheatley said. Dib beckoned for GIR to follow after Zim, but GIR yawned and wandered off in the direction they'd come from.

Dib dropped his hand. "I'm just gonna go ahead and jump," he said.

Wheatley's optic widened slightly. "What? You don't think he should go ahead of us? We've, uh, we've got light, what if he—I dunno, what if he gets lost, or eaten, or something?"

"Uh, I don't think he gets lost," Dib said, looking doubtfully at GIR's retreating figure. "I think he just sort of turns up."

"You sure? You know, we don't have to go this way," Wheatley said. "I'm sure there's thousands—millions—of other ways to get where we want to go. Let's see, let me check my map, I'll pull it right up… here… Um, yes, there are in fact ways to go around. Give me two ticks and I'll even find us a shortcut."

"But you're the one who said we had to jump down there!" Dib said. "What about Zim?"
Wheatley looked askance down on the platforms below, where Zim was waiting impatiently for GIR. "Pssh, he'll be fine, I'm sure."

"Are you all dead?" Zim shouted up at them. He was walking in the opposite direction that the floor was moving in order to stay directly below them.

"See? What've I been telling you? He wants us all dead!" Wheatley said.

Dib frowned, irritated. "Oh, come on."

"Well, all right, if you really insist on jumping down a bloody huge distance onto moving platforms just to catch up with your best friend down there, then go right ahead. Just—uh, be careful, and be quick, and do, uh, do keep your grip on me—"

Bending his knees, Dib pinpointed where he wanted to land and jumped into empty space, biting back a retort when Wheatley slammed his optic closed and cut off the light. They fell through the darkness, Dib's heart in his throat and his ears ringing with Wheatley's frightened yells, and landed on the moving platforms below with only a soft bump thanks to the long fall boots.

"Where is GIR?" Zim demanded from somewhere close by.

"He stayed up there," Dib said. "Wheatley, you can open your eye now."

"Right, I knew that," Wheatley said, opening his optic back up and letting light stream over the three of them, and recoiling a little when he saw Zim standing in front of him. "...Ah. Hello. Again. Exactly like I wanted." He glanced at Dib. "Good, er, good jumping, though, little mate! Stellar, you kept your grip on me, and everything, yes. So! Moving on then?"

They were already moving, the platforms they were standing on taking them farther down a narrow alleyway. Zim pushed past Dib and rushed back to where they'd jumped from, calling upwards.

"GIR! GIR, heed your master! Get back down here!"

"I wanna get ice cream!" GIR yelled back, his voice faint.

Zim growled. "We'll get ice cream later! Now just get down here!"

Dib left them to that, heading forward by the glow of Wheatley's flashlight. Zim had claimed that he could see without light, anyway, so he and GIR would probably be fine.

Wheatley didn't protest to leaving the two of them behind for the time being. Instead, he hesitated for a moment, then said, "Sooo... you're sure you aren't getting tired of that guy yet, little mate? You're not, I dunno, regretting asking him to come along with us, or anything—"

"Of course I am!" Dib sighed. "We're pretty much mortal enemies, anyhow. But what else can we do? We might need his help down here and I'll need him if—" He inhaled sharply. "When we get back to the surface. I need to show him to the Swollen Eyeballs."

"What's that, a pair of giant disembodied eyeballs?" Wheatley muttered. "Humans are bloody weird."

"It's the name of this secret organization I'm part of." If he ever got out of here, he'd have loads to tell them about this place.

They were nearing a new catwalk that ran right next to the moving platforms.

"Oh, get out there," Wheatley said, directing the light onto the catwalk. Dib shuffled over to it and
clambered over the railing, fighting to keep a grip on the portal gun and Wheatley. "Brilliant! Shouldn't be far now. We'll be there in no time."

"I'M GETTIN' THERE FIRST!" a high-pitched voice shouted, and GIR sprinted down the platforms, vaulting over Dib and somersaulting onto the catwalk. "I win!"

Seconds later Zim came running up, still cradling his PAK in his arms. "GIR! Be quiet!" He crawled under the catwalk railing, nearly collided with Wheatley, and hurried after his robot minion. Wheatley let out a disgruntled noise at their return.

It was only a short walk before the core directed them to a rusty ladder standing against a large, gray-walled structure (which Dib climbed one-handed with some trepidation), and then onto a narrow platform and through a door at the top. Zim and GIR followed after him and they emerged into a dark room. When they entered, motion-detecting lights flickered on and lit up the place. It looked empty.

"Oh! Oh, yes, this is almost it!" Wheatley said, spinning around excitedly in the humming energy field put off by Dib's portal gun and switching off his flashlight. Dib stopped just inside the doorway, glancing around, and Zim walked right into him.

"What's this place?" Zib asked Wheatley.

The core waved his upper handlebar at the white-paneled wall to the far right of the room. "Right, if I'm reading this map correctly, which I am, then right behind that wall is the turret production center! Which is where we're going. In case that wasn't obvious." He shifted position and waved to the wall in front of them. "Quick! Bring me over there, and a thing'll happen."

"What thing?" Zim said.

"It's cool, trust me, you'll love it," Wheatley said.

Dib, bracing himself without really being sure why, edged toward the wall in question. When he got closer a panel opened up and pulled back to reveal some sort of receptacle with a stick jutting from it.

"See, an access port!" Wheatley said. "Go ahead, put me on it?"

Dib hesitated.

"Go on, I can't climb onto it myself!" Wheatley said. "What're you waitin' for, the crows to come home? They can stay far away from here, if it's all the same to you."

"You really want me to plug you directly into the facility?" Dib asked. "Isn't that kinda dangerous?"

"Oh, for Irk's sake!" Zim stalked forward, ripped Wheatley out of the portal gun's energy field (the core let out a squawk akin to one that might come from an injured goose), and jammed his back onto the receptacle. The machine pulled him in and clamped onto his handlebars, pinning them above and below his frame.

"Ow!" Wheatley groaned, his optic turning circles for a moment. He glared at Zim. "Oh, thanks. If you've damaged my back port by bloody ramming me into this thing, then I'll have your other eye. And... and I'll eat it. Somehow. I'll figure it out."

Zim stepped back and planted both hands on his hips, ignoring the empty threat. "Well?"
"Er…" Wheatley glanced between Dib and Zim, suddenly seeming reluctant. "Well, see, I sort of have this thing about people watching me do this—"

Oh come on, didn't they have more pressing concerns at the moment? The very thought of closing his eyes here and being unaware of his surroundings made Dib cringe. When he glanced over at Zim, the alien looked equally as uneasy. Or maybe nervousness had just become part of Zim's natural state of being.

And besides worry for himself, Dib didn't like the thought of turning his back on Wheatley—especially when the core was so vulnerable, plugged right into a receptacle in the wall.

Wheatley peered up at them, looking small with his handles outspread and immobile. "Aren't you gonna maybe turn around?"

"No," Dib said.

"I never turn around!" Zim snapped.

Wheatley's cautious look became an irritated scowl. "Fine, fine, all right, refuse to heed the wishes of the little core that's saved both your lives…"

"When exactly did you save Zim's life?" Dib asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Er, when I allowed him to come along with us, obviously," Wheatley replied. "Now how do I…?"

The circular plate around his optic spun clockwise about ninety degrees and back, then counterclockwise, then kept turning and stopping at various points. At last everything clicked into place and his lower optic shutter pulled up in a grin. "Aha! Got it!"

On the right side of the room a panel creaked open, leaving a gap. Dib and Zim both spun around, startled by the noise.

"Secret panel. The whole facility's full of 'em," Wheatley said, a slight swagger entering his voice just before the receptacle pushed him out and he tumbled face-first onto the floor. "Ouch. Er, somebody care to pick me back up? Anybody? Going once? Going twice? Sold! To nobody at all, apparently."

"All right, all right, I've got you!" Dib heaved Wheatley up off the floor with the portal gun's energy beam. "Now what? Through the opening?"

"Exactly. Yes." Wheatley bobbed his face up and down. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

Dib, clutching the portal device, crawled through the gap. He had to squeeze past the thick metal arm that held the panel in place, then edge through an even narrower crack between the panels to get through to the other side, blinking at the expansive room they'd found.

"Hello?"

"Heeeello."

"Hellooo?"

"Hello."

"Hey, can I maybe get some bullets, somewhere? Or—AAAUUUUHH!"
There was a noise like a catapult and something dark flew by overhead in a perfect arc, falling straight into a chute with an aperture-like opening of the kind Dib had seen before. There had been one in the computer's chamber when he'd first arrived here, and he knew it led to the incinerator.

Across the room was what looked like an automated assembly line, a conveyor belt carrying turrets past some sort of scanner where each one had to stop and repeat a phrase. Dib, Wheatley, Zim, and GIR were on a catwalk sitting high above the conveyor belt.

"Oh brilliant, we made it!" Wheatley said as Dib walked out into the room. "She's made this place pretty difficult to get to but er, hey, not much problem for good old Wheatley here, eh? Now, if we could just find a working connector around here somewhere. Do you see one anywhere? You know what they look like, don't—?"

Wheatley happened to glance upward and he spluttered. "What the—?"

"What?" Dib asked, on instant alert and hoping it wasn't just another false alarm.

"There's no bloody rail up there anymore!" the core cried. "The whole management rail, gone! Well no wonder I couldn't bloody find a better way in here, it's all completely blocked off!"

Dib looked up as well and saw that Wheatley was right—there was no rail overhead. "What do we do now?"

"Well…" Wheatley said, seeming agitated, "We don't strictly need a rail for this, but I'd sure like to have one… Can't have everything, I s'pose…"

A scream broke out behind them. Dib whipped his head around to see Zim leaning heavily against the catwalk railing again, apparently cowering away from the turret line.

"They won't shoot us in here, will they?" Dib asked, nodding to the turrets and setting Wheatley down on the floor so he could sit up by balancing on his lower handlebar.

"As far as I know, turrets'll shoot you anywhere as long as they've got bullets," Wheatley replied. "And as long as they're not defectives. You know, the ones being tossed out."

Once again, a dark shape flew over their heads and fell into the incinerator chute, screaming.

"Like that, there goes another one. I met some of those guys once, last time. They're weird. Can't shoot, either, and they're all blind as bats."

Dib couldn't help correcting that. "Bats aren't blind."

Wheatley frowned up at him. "Look, mate, I will admit I'm not always the uh, the sharpest scalpel on the table, but I think I know a thing or two about bats. Granted, I've never met one of them, but…"

"What are we here for?" Zim demanded, marching back over to them. "Why did you lead me to a room full of DEATH?"

"All right, okay, now that we're here I can explain! First part of the plan, explaining right now," Wheatley said. "Why don't you sit down?"

No one moved.

"Or keep standing, that's fine too," he said. "All right, here goes. First, we're gonna grab a turret."

"Which one?" Dib looked out over the conveyor belt trundling hundreds of turrets through the room.
"Doesn't matter. Any turret that's not defective," Wheatley said. "See, something I learned when I was going through the databases while I was, er… 'taking care of' this place, as it were, was that turrets—they're not very sophisticated. They don't really have, y'know, advanced artificial intelligence or anything—well, I already knew that, s'nothing knew, but something else I learned was that every turret has got this special chip thing—"

Zim stiffened and made a noise of protest. Dib looked around for anything that might have hit him, especially considering their current surroundings, but nothing seemed to have happened.

Wheatley carried on as if he hadn't even noticed. "Every turret's got this chip that generates this, ah… oh, what's it called…"

"Hatred?" Dib supplied wearily.

"No, no, something else. Oh! Empathy! Empathy, yes!" Wheatley nodded excitedly. "And they have another chip that suppresses it, which is probably why they shoot people—kind of pointless to have both, really, but we don't care about those anyway. Because those empathy generators really do work, or so I'm told. Soooooo, I'm thinking we take one, and we put it inside Her. It'll generate empathy and then BAM! Maybe it'll actually stop Her from wanting to kill every living thing She sees. Or non-living, in my case. And then maybe She'll even start thinking about letting us go, who knows."

He beamed. "Well? What d'you think? Good plan, yeah? We'd have to destroy some turrets to do it, but hey, gotta break a few turrets to make an omelette. Of… turret parts."

"Um…" Dib hesitated. "Hey, Wheatley, what exactly did you tell me your programming was, again?"

"Nothing, not important," Wheatley said quickly.

"Em… pathy?" Zim sounded out the word, clearly not even comprehending it.

Dib said nothing else for a moment. He'd thought they were working out a plan to save Wheatley's friend, not take down the computer. Was that even possible? Well, sure, she had to have some sort of weakness, but… this couldn't be it, right? There was no way.

He pictured the supercomputer as he remembered her from their single meeting face-to-face—her gigantic form, hanging from the ceiling with robotic claws hidden behind the panels surrounding the room, and that one unblinking, staring yellow eye. How she'd ripped Wheatley out of his hands and casually tossed him down the incinerator chute; how she'd trapped Dib himself in testing and tried to kill him with neurotoxin and then fire; how she'd done… whatever she'd done to Zim…

He tried to imagine her feeling any sort of compassion for something that wasn't herself.

"Maybe we should try something else," Dib said finally, casting a doubtful look down at Wheatley. "Just one of those things can't be enough to stop her from trying to murder us, y'know? And if we're going to try something against her we'll probably only have one chance at most. How are we supposed to put one of those things in her, anyway?"

"All right then, have you got a better plan? I'd love to hear it," Wheatley said, perhaps a little more sharply than he likely intended. "…Sorry. Not tryin' to be rude. But—don't act like you know this place better than I do, mate. We'll figure it all out, and trust me, two empathy generators will work fine. Three, definitely three, three will work. Better go with four. Maybe five to be safe. Or six, to be even safer."
"Okay, how many of those do you think we'd really need for this?" Dib asked.

The core hesitated. "Want to try seven?"

Gaz couldn't shake the feeling that their party was being picked off one by one.

First, GIR had gotten left behind—which truthfully wasn't a big loss, but he’d been leading them to Zim and Gaz was sure that Dib couldn't be far away. But now Chell was gone, too. And it was up to Gaz and Nick to finish what she started.

"As if I even know how to do that," Gaz growled. She tilted her head to frown up at Nick, who was motoring above her on his connector while she passed silently through a corridor that was located a great distance away from where Chell had sent her off alone. "You. Tell me about this place. Why did Chell need to destroy that neurotoxin generator? I'm not even going to ask why that thing's here in the first place."

"She didn't tell you why she was doing it?" The core sounded genuinely surprised.

"I dunno if you noticed, but she didn't really talk much down here." Gaz rolled her eyes. 

"Okay! Well, she probably wanted to break the neurotoxin thingy to stop the Boss from using it and poisoning any humans in this place, because She tends to do that a lot. I think. Or maybe your friend just likes breaking stuff and needed to get some aggression out! She seems like the type, doesn't she?"

"Hm." Gaz thought about this for a second. "Either way, I guess it was a good idea." She stopped and leaned back against the wall for a moment, folding her arms.

"I'm sick of this whole thing," she muttered. "If Zim's stupid robot was still around I'd probably get him to fly me back out of here for good."

"Whaaaa?" Nick said, shocked. "But then you wouldn't finish your tour!"

Gaz groaned and leaned her head back, frowning up at the ceiling. "We're not on a tour, genius, we were never on a tour. I've been looking for my brother this whole time."

"Ooh, really? Well this is kind of a weird place to look—"

"I know it is, but Chell said he's trapped down here!" Gaz glared down at her hands, clenching and unclenching them. "Why did I ever trust her, anyway? Some strange lady shows up at my house and I just follow her straight into an underground death trap? Who does that? This is exactly why I should lock the front door now."

The core twitched his handle in what Gaz assumed was his approximation of a shrug. "She seemed nice to me!"

"Yeah, sure." Gaz touched the place on her neck where the cord from her skull necklace was supposed to be. She ran her hands through her hair and shook with sudden rage. "What did Dib even do to deserve me coming after him? He was the one who was playing with that stupid robot, he got himself into this mess. What is the POINT in me BEING here?!" Gaz was on her feet, grinding her teeth. "Why can't I find STUPID DIB with his STUPID HAIR and glasses that stand out like video game glitches? WHERE IS HE?"

"Hey hey hey, calm down!" Nick said, motoring forward. "What's wrong? Do you wanna go
destroy more stuff? I'd be okay with that! It'd make you feel better, right?"

Gaz said nothing for a moment. "…It might. But right now I just want to get Dib, get Chell, and get out of here."

"Sounds like a great plan!" Nick said, smiling. "Where do we start?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out," Gaz growled. She glanced up at him again. "Hey, since you actually live in this stupid place, where do you think Dib might be?"

The core paused. "Hm. If he was captured, he's probably in testing! Or maybe he's in storage. Poor little guy, aw."

Gaz grimaced. "What kind of testing?"

"It's like a maze mixed with an obstacle course with acid pools and turrets," Nick said thoughtfully. "But I can't tell if any tests are running from here because it's not my job."

"What is your job?"

"Boosting morale!" The core beamed. "I can make anyone smile! Even you, once you've warmed up to me!"

"I think I'd only be smiling if you were being melted down."

"Ahaha! That's funny!" Nick smiled, apparently finding nothing worrying about the statement. Suddenly he froze, and an excited look came over him as though he'd just realized something. "You know who might know where your brother is? Huh?"

"Who," Gaz said flatly.

"The nanos!" Nick exclaimed. "The nanobots go everywhere to fix things! Maybe they've seen him! It's exciting to see humans around here so they'd probably remember him. Wanna go check it out?!"

Instead of answering right away, Gaz grunted and reached into her pocket, pulling out the half of a meal bar that she'd stashed there. She unwrapped it and took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. "Can nanobots even talk?"

"Well, they can talk to me," Nick replied. "We could go find some and ask about your brother! If you want to."

Gaz gave in and shrugged, brushing crumbs off her front and tossing the empty wrapper onto the floor. "Fine. Let's just go."

"We can go back to neurotoxin production," Nick said, clearly delighted that Gaz had agreed to go along with him. "We're close by and the nanobots are probably there trying to fix everything!"

"Sure, okay." Gaz let out a long sigh and checked the container strapped to her back. It was nearly empty but felt like it had enough melting liquid in it to seriously harm another AI, if it came to it. She wondered whether Chell, had she managed to escape whatever had been chasing them, would be waiting for her somewhere they'd visited in the hopes that Gaz and Nick would come back. Maybe neurotoxin production where they were heading now, or perhaps the daycare center or Extended Relaxation.

Really, why was this place so huge?
Nick led the way back to the neurotoxin production center in relative quiet, finding Gaz the smoothest paths to follow since, unlike Chell, she had no braces on her legs to protect her from falls. When they got near enough for Gaz's gamer instincts to start recognizing subtle landmarks, her walk slowed to a creep. She fumbled with the visor of Dib's X-scope, still resting on top of her head, and pulled it down over her eyes. The world around her changed into a sort of discolored x-ray view, allowing her to peer through the solid door and walls of the production center as they approached. Inside the room, the giant tank of neurotoxin still seemed to be gone, which was good. But there was no sign of Chell anywhere around.

"Look out, the nanos are nearby!" Nick whispered urgently. Gaz lifted up the visor and glanced around but didn't see anything, then berated herself. Of course she couldn't see them, they were minuscule. "I'm gonna go talk to them! You stay here, m'kay?"

Nick pulled away from her and went closer to the door, where Gaz assumed the nanobots to be.

"Hi!" he said to absolutely no one.

Gaz couldn't deal with this. She left the area and headed back the way they'd come until she couldn't hear the core's voice anymore, then leaned against the wall to wait. She pulled the visor of the X-scope down over her eyes again and scrutinized the surrounding area for possible threats. Nope, nothing. If she couldn't find Dib, couldn't something a little bit exciting happen, at least?

After a moment Nick came back, looking worried, but brightened when he saw her and rushed over. "Okay, okay! I'm back! So, they said they hadn't seen anyone. And they weren't very friendly. They sort of yelled it at me."

"Great," Gaz said.

"But there's more!" Nick went on. "They were all complaining when I went to talk to them, and I thought they were complaining about each other, but they were actually talking about another group of nanobots. It still wasn't very nice, but at least they weren't talking about each other. Anyway, they said this other little group of nanos was acting funny, like they'd gone rogue, and that they kept talking about a blue-eyed robot and a human boy. Does that sound familiar?"

Gaz straightened up, fixing her attention fully on the core now. "Yeah, it does. What did they say about them?"

"I don't really know, but we could go find out! Apparently the rogue nanos are hanging around at Extended Relaxation."

"Of course they are," Gaz said with a snort. Things hadn't gone well last time they'd tried visiting that place, but sure, why not?

"Great! So let's go there!" Nick beamed. "This sure is an adventure, huh?"

Not for the first time, she wondered if they were just going around in circles. Nick was leading the way back to Extended Relaxation with full confidence but Gaz was positive that they had passed the exact same tubes, ladders, and structures at least three times already.

"Hey, want to keep going with our game?" Nick asked. "You had an animal, right? What question were we on?"

"Question infinity. You lose," Gaz said. "Are we almost there?"
"Uh, I think so!" Nick said. He indicated a set of steps made of the same metal grating as the catwalks. "Just up those stairs!"

She started up the steps while, above, Nick zipped upward on the management rail. "Why don't you think of an animal?" Gaz asked in a bored voice after a moment.

"Me?!" the core gasped. "Okay! Got one!"

"It's small," Gaz said.

Nick nodded. "Yep."

"Insect."

"Yep again!"

"Carnivorous."

"Yes…?"

Gaz sighed. "Praying mantis."

"Wow!" Nick exclaimed. "You got that so easily! Okay, my turn, my turn! No, wait, your turn for another animal, my turn to guess."

"Oh, too bad, we're here.″ Gaz reached the top of the stairs and found herself standing on, surprise, more catwalk. "Ugh. Well, we're somewhere. Does anything in this place actually have a point?"

"Well, most stuff does," Nick said. "Some of us don't really—" He simulated a quick intake of breath. "Someone's coming!"

A split second later Gaz heard it too—the clank, clank, clank of heavy footsteps on the catwalk just around the corner. She cast around for a hiding spot and saw that the underside of the catwalk was held to the wall with limited metal scaffolding. Hurriedly she motioned for Nick to get out of here and, holding her breath and without stopping to think, she clambered over the railing and down onto the scaffolding, wrapping her legs around it and ducking out of sight of the catwalk above. Nick sent her an awed but worried glance before hurrying off down his rail, hopefully not too far away.

Gaz crouched uncomfortably with her feet resting on one support beam and her hands gripping another, peering up through the metal mesh of the catwalk. She was perfectly hidden so long as no one looked down at her. Directly below her there was almost nothing except for fog and an endless pit. If she lost her grip, that would be it for her. Better not lose her grip. What a dumb way to go.

She watched with wide eyes as something robotic came around the corner and started toward her, the footsteps clanging in Gaz's ears. It was difficult to tell from this angle but Gaz thought the robot looked like the same one she and Chell had chased to try to get Zim back.

Someone with a lighter step came next, and Gaz raised her eyebrows. It was Chell! She was moving quietly, but not sneakily enough to go undetected by that robot right in front of her. Maybe it was escorting her somewhere? Gaz inched closer to the edge of the pathway, watching the small procession carefully. The robot walked right over her makeshift hiding spot without noticing her. When Chell was about to follow suit, Gaz threw caution to the wind—she let go of the beam with one hand, swung it over the edge, and grabbed Chell's ankle. Then she whipped her hand out of sight again.
Chell gasped and looked around wildly before glancing straight down; her eyes widened in surprise and maybe horror. Gaz gave a slight wave.

Up ahead the robot stopped and gurgled something in a questioning tone. Chell motioned it onward, kneeling down as if to adjust her long fall boot.

"Are you insane?" Chell hissed through the floor. Gaz briefly considered how stupid she must actually look right now if it was enough to make Chell talk in this place.

"We found a lead on Dib," Gaz whispered. "And your little robot, too, I guess."

Something passed over Chell's face but Gaz couldn't guess what it was through the grating. "Me too," she breathed. Quickly she glanced around again as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Get out of there now. Stay out of trouble. Go wait in Extended Relaxation."

Gaz scowled. "I was going there anyway."

Chell nodded brusquely, stood back up, and continued onward down the stairs as if nothing had happened. Gaz nearly called after her angrily but stopped herself. If that robot had heard anything they'd all be in trouble.

But Chell hadn't even wanted to hear Gaz's lead. She hadn't even given the skull necklace back—and she wasn't wearing her satchel or backpack. Maybe she'd lost them.

Carefully Gaz climbed back up onto the catwalk and stood there watching as Chell reached the bottom of the stairs. The woman looked back up at her, dipped her head, and then left.

Gaz fumed. So much for Chell waiting around to meet back up again. Or for being any sort of help whatsoever. The two of them could've taken on that robot easily but instead Chell was following it around like a trained puppy. Was she even interested in finding Dib after all? Maybe all along she'd only ever wanted to find that stupid blue-eyed sphere Dib was dragging around everywhere.

Well, if she thought palling around with that other robot would help with that, then fine.

Gaz had more important things to do.

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A/N: Humans ain't what they seem to be

They don't mean that much to me, no, not much at all...
The Nightmare... Continues?

A/N: Oh, it's you. It's been a long time. How have you been? I've been really busy... being dead.

Ahh yes, about the uh, year-long absence, well, actually longer than that... I'm sorry about that, guys. I've been having a really hard time writing lately. It wasn't even that I spent a long time writing this, though, I had it all written but it was all in messy pieces and I had to figure out how to stitch it together into something (hopefully) coherent.

I've said it before, but I've always meant to see this fic to the end, and I do not want to let it die. So here is the next chapter! Hope you enjoy!

Never in his life had Zim ever had this little fun taking metal death-robots apart.

His fingers were so filthy. And chafing. And the tips were rubbed raw from prying apart mechanics for hours without gloves. If he brought his hands too close to his face he caught the reek of old, greasy metal from the turrets they captured from the production line, even though those were supposed to be "new." He gathered that they were hastily thrown together from recycled parts and dropped into tests with the expectation of being dismantled again shortly. Lucky for them that they were so shoddily made, though. Neither he nor even the Dib needed so much as a screwdriver to take the things apart after they’d knocked them offline.

Of course, he would have preferred having one, though. Anything rather than using his bare hands like a primitive human meat child.

He worked sitting bent over and cross-legged on the catwalk with the metal springs on his legs digging sharply into his calves. The small of his back was pressed up against the railing—he could feel his spine braced against it, his nerves shuddering at the unaccustomed contact. He shifted slightly to try to ease the pressure, and recoiled with a hiss through his teeth. Now the railing was touching one of the round ports in his back where his PAK was supposed to hook into. The sensation made him stiffen and push himself back into his former (yet slightly less painful) position.

Zim spat out a violent curse in Irken, glaring at the palms of his trembling hands. That… that… computer. This was all her fault. Her, and Dib, and GIR, and—

Wait, what was he supposed to be doing right now? Oh, dismantling turrets. Right.

The one sitting in front of him was already dead. Zim reached out and gripped it by one of its front legs, dragging it closer to him with a screech of metal against the grating that made his antenna shiver horribly. He jerked his hand away, paused, and scooted forward until he was so close he could see the circular pattern of the glass making up the turret's unlit optic. Hunching his shoulders, he dug his claws into a seam in the turret's white casing and pried it apart with a grunt, exposing the wires. The robot's red optic blinked on and flickered; it let out a tiny "Oh!" before the light died again. One of the inner cables sparked under Zim's fingers.

He hissed again and stuck his fingers in his mouth, sucking on them and spitting out the grime. Zim scowled at the dead turret for a second before reaching forward again. This time, he managed to pull the two halves of the turret apart and reached into the inner workings, shoving hardware and wires out of the way with a furrowed brow. His hand brushed up against a tiny cylinder lodged in one of the components. Zim took it tightly in his thumb and forefinger and unscrewed it, pulling it out and holding it up close to his eye to squint at it. It was around the size of a human's thumbnail, a dull gray
in color, and greasy with machine oil. Ew.

Printed on it were two tiny symbols—a pink heart (Zim felt a slight pang in his chest) and a little plus sign. That seemed promising.

He polished it on his jumpsuit, to little effect, and glanced over at Dib's little round robot sitting on the catwalk nearby. The core sat propped up on its lower handlebar and was rudely paying no attention to Zim, opting instead to watch apprehensively as GIR swooped over the slow-moving turret line and pushed over turrets at his leisure.

"Hey!" Zim called, startling the core into looking at him, and held out the cylinder. "Is this what we're looking for?"

The core squinted at it. "Er, yes. Like I told you before, yes. I think that's it." His lower optic shutter lifted in a slight smile. "Probably. Almost definitely, yes. Empathy generator. Keep on finding things exactly like that and we will be bloody golden. Soon we'll be able to move onto the second part! Of the plan. Part two."

"I've already got two generators," Dib piped up from over on the other side of the core, where he was working on his own turret.

Zim squeezed the tiny generator in his fingers. "Yeah well I've already got two dozen of I don't care!" he snapped.

His fingers slipped. The cylinder fell from his hand, bounced off the catwalk and under the railing, and tumbled into the darkness below.

Zim lunged after it far too late, his hands scrabbling at empty air. "Aaaarrggghh, no! Not again!"

"Hey Zim," Dib said, looking up again and narrowing his eyes at him, "if you're going to keep throwing these things into the abyss, maybe you'd better sit this one out."

"They're slippery!" Zim grabbed the empty casing of his turret, heaved it up over his head with a grunt, and threw it down over the railing with as much force as he could muster. He watched it fall until it vanished from sight and listened hard for the satisfying clunk of it striking the floor—but there was nothing.

How far down does it go?

He leaned out a little farther over the railing. A bizarre, fluttering feeling tingled at the back of his mind, urging him to jump over the edge and find out for himself. He recoiled from the railing, clasping his hands over his chest and shaking his head to clear it. Something flickered in the corner of his vision and his attention was drawn once more to his treacherous life clock.

It was counting down from four minutes. Four minutes, and here he was, wasting precious Zim-life with… this.

Growling, he whirled around to face Dib and the core, hands planted on his hips. "What are we doing here? This is stupid. STUPID! I want to destroy that computer, not turn it into a HUG MACHINE!"

The robot stared. "Er, what?"

"YOU HEARD ME!"
"Sheesh, calm down!" Dib said as he yanked something out of his turret and stuck it in his pocket. "Hah, three now. But really, Zim, I think you'd need way more than seven or eight chips to turn GLaDOS into a—uh, what'd you say. Hug machine? Whatever that means. I definitely don't want to give her a hug, anyway."

"Same here, same here," the core said, looking rattled. "I agree one hundred percent with that sentiment. She and Her claws can stay far away from me from now on, thanks."

"Also," Dib continued, waving to GIR for a new turret, "I sorta think we should really try to destroy as few things as possible from here on out. Enough has gone wrong already and we should just focus on getting everyone out of here. Your petty revenge can wait until we're finally home, all right?"

Zim froze.

"...Petty?" he repeated, his voice no more than a croak and his mouth like cotton. "Petty revenge? PETTY?"

The Dib sighed, picking up his dissected turret in the beam from his portal gun and dropping it over the catwalk. He kept his eyes averted from Zim. "Well, yeah. You know what petty means, right? Because I mean, what'd that computer do to you, make you run a few easy tests without a portal gun? I heard she even gave you cake."

Tension crackled in the air like Zim's failed past attempt at experimenting with modified Tesla coils. He became acutely aware of the pain from every little scratch on his body. Every injury from the enflamed skin around his knees, to his sore and bleeding feet, to his aching hands, to the burn of his missing eye, to his replaced PAK legs (which he begrudgingly had to admit functioned perfectly well but still felt disgustingly different.)

Was- was the Dib blind?

Zim stood rigid, his arms pressed to his sides and his hands shaking. "Y-y-you—you— YOOOOOOooooouuuu could never comprehend, Earth larvae!" he rasped. "I've seen horrors—"

"Oh, like what, Zim?" the human demanded, finally looking at him. "Huh? HUH? Horrors? How am I supposed to have any context for that coming from you? Your definition of 'horror' is the creepy animatronics from Bloaty's! But I saw the inside of an incinerator."

The core glanced over at him. "Er, not sure that's really somethin' to brag about, mate—"

Zim's snarl cut him off as he lunged forward to stand face-to-face with Dib, who backed up a step in alarm. "WELL, it would've been better for all of us if you'd stayed there!"

Dib crossed his arms. "Yeah? And where would you be if I wasn't here?"

"If you weren't here, then I wouldn't have been dragged down here either!" Zim faltered with a few deep breaths and forced himself to choke out an awkward laugh, backing off with a flippant hand wave. "I... I misspoke. An Invader such as myself could never be horrified by anything on your putrid planet, besides your species' disgusting bathing habits. I'll never be affected by anything this place tries to do to me!"

The human raised an eyebrow. He pointed to Zim's PAK, sitting by the catwalk railing. "All right, so put your PAK back on," he said. "Go on. I wanna see you do it."

Uh.
PAK?

That's... what Zim thought Dib had just said, anyway. His brain seemed to be having trouble processing the words that had just spewed from the human's gaping speech hole.

When Zim didn't immediately respond, Wheatley groaned. "Oh, would you lot give it a break with that thing already?" he said. "You keep going on and on about it! Every ten minutes you're yelling about taking it off or yelling about putting it back on again! It's enough to drive a bot mad! Can't you just pick one and be done with it?"

Dib tore his eyes from Zim and looked over at the robot. "He refuses to keep it on even though it's the only thing keeping him alive," he said. "It doesn't make any sense!"

The core tilted his faceplate, blinking up at him. "Well so what? Look, little mate, if he's not bothered about keeping it on then I dunno why we should be, all right? Just leave 'im alone, and if you stop arguing with him about it maybe he'll stop screaming for once."

Zim would never admit that he agreed with Dib's stupid pet robot, but he would very much like it if the Dib-thing would leave him alone about the PAK. And also, he was not screaming. He pointedly turned away from both of them and glanced around with a scowl, raising his voice perhaps more than necessary as he called, "GIR! Bring me another turret!"

"YES, MISTER CYCLOPS!" GIR swooped down out of nowhere in a blaze of white and blue flames. His eyes flashed the deep red of human blood and he rocketed over Zim's head, diving low over the turret line. He flung his arms around the oblong body of the nearest turret ("Whee!" it cried), dragged it up into the air, and flew back around to drop it at Zim's feet.

"I got yooouuuuu a real pretty one!" GIR said, and blasted away again, leaving behind a twisting trail of white smoke that made Zim cough into his fist.

GIR's chosen turret looked no different from the others. A thin red beam flickered from its optic and focused on the middle of Zim's forehead. "Target acqui—"

"Enough!" Zim backhanded the thing and sent it crashing into the railing. It cried out and fired wildly; Zim ducked, while Dib snatched up Wheatley with a sharp retort and dragged him further down the catwalk.

The light died from the turret's optic and it calmed, its side panels folding closed. Ignoring his smarting knuckles, Zim pulled the turret over to him and wedged his claws into the casing, just as he had with the other one, but this time his arms were trembling so badly that he couldn't pull the thing apart.

A tiny whimper escaped his throat, cold sweat beading his brow. He ran the back of his hand over his forehead and wiped it off on his dirty jumpsuit, noticing as he did that his index finger still had dried blood caked on the tip. He licked it off with a leaden tongue. Both of his hands were streaked with dirt and grease and he couldn't even look at his feet. Flexing his fingers, he once again dug his claws into the turret and ripped it in two, unscrewing yet another tiny cylinder. He dropped it into his jumpsuit pocket.

There. One. Fantastic.

He shivered and massaged his face with his fingers, blinking slowly. His hand brushed up against the fabric covering his right eye socket and his fingers tensed; he yanked his hands away and shakily pushed the dead turret casing behind him, beckoning to GIR for yet another one.
"So what exactly are we doing with these things?" Dib asked, tipping his newest finished turret over the railing. Zim locked his eye on it and tracked its fall until it disappeared in darkness. "These generators are tiny. How are we supposed to hook all of them up to GLaDOS?"

The core winced. "Well, we're going to have to hook them all up to something else, first, I expect. And then connect that to Her. Or something attached to Her." He thought for a moment. "We could maybe save out one of the turrets and sort of... load all the generators into it? Yeah, that might work. Get rid of the empathy suppressor first, though, obviously. Or if we could find another core to do it, that'd be ideal. Cores are—well, we're basically custom-made for being hooked up to Her, aren't we, un-unfortunately."

"Well, then we'll just string them all into you!" Zim said, his heavy tongue slurring his words together. A sudden sharp pain shot through his head and he pressed his fingers to his temples, grimacing.

The core paid no attention to Zim's horrible pain, crying, "I didn't mean me! I meant someone else! Anyone else, some other core who She'll probably not kill as soon as She sees it!"

Taking shallow, shuddering breaths, Zim squeezed his eye closed and rested his head against the catwalk railing, the bitter cold of the metal seeping into his skin. His antenna twitched.

"But doesn't she try to kill everyone?" Dib said, clearly ignoring Zim as well. "She killed that other core we sent to her and she didn't even have a grudge against him. Unless she did, and that's another thing you forgot to tell me about."

"Oh. Oh, right. She did kill that other guy, yeah, right outta the blue. That one was nothin' personal, of course. No history there. None. Well, mostly. There was that one time. But see, with me, whole other story, obviously..."

The core continued to babble, but his words faded and turned to nonsense and it became hard to focus on what he was even saying. He probably wasn't even saying anything coherent anyway.

Zim's head was sloshy. He curled around his squeedily-spooch, which felt like it had been violently wrung out, beaten, and overfilled with mud; his hands and feet were like ice but his head was clammy with sweat, his mouth was bone dry, the injuries to his finger and antennae seemed to be getting worse instead of better, and his eye socket still hurt with a constant dull ache...

How long could he keep this up?

PAKs were meant to be worn at all times. Not to be kept off for extended periods, and certainly not put on and taken off constantly. No wonder he wasn't fixed yet, who knew what this was doing to his healing cycles. How long could he really go on like this?

And when on Irk was the world going to stop spinning?

As if in response to his question, the ground jolted beneath his feet and he was knocked off-balance. He grabbed onto the railing for support—but it moved. It twitched under his fingers, like a living thing.

Zim's eyes snapped open and he let out a strangled gasp of realization, stumbling backwards.

He hadn't been leaning on a railing. He'd been resting his head on a robotic claw.

Darkness closed in around him until he was left in a shallow puddle of sickly yellow light glinting off the evil metal. The claw snapped open and closed with a set of vicious clangs and crawled toward
him, but Zim's legs refused to move, like they'd been tied to cement blocks. He tripped and fell back. His hand flew to his missing eye and pressed against the bandages. "Hey! Hey! What do you want now?!

The metal claw continued to snake forward. Zim scrambled backwards and tried to activate his PAK legs, but- but he wasn't wearing his PAK, it was sitting on the catwalk somewhere and he couldn't see it, useless thing—!

"Get away!" he yelled, slashing at the air with his own unsheathed claws. "Get away! Leave Zim alone!"

The claw halted in midair inches from his chest. Terror froze him to the ground, he could feel his heart pounding in his throat.

"Okay, fine. I didn't want to help you anyway," a gruff, male voice said, and the claw pulled away at last. If lifted into the ceiling to disappear amid a mass of purple cables and wires.

Zim got unsteadily to his feet, his legs wobbling like Vortian gelatin.

What? What?

"Er, thank- thank you, Computer," he said, his voice coming out more hoarse than he'd intended. He gave a harsh cough into his fist. "You've done well."

"Uh, sure. Thanks," the Computer grunted. "Oh and by the way, the Tallest are calling. Just thought you should know." It shut off with a few quick beeps.

There was silence for a moment.

What had just happened? Zim wriggled his toes a bit, his dull claws clinking off the tile of his living room. He gave a start. Hey! Where were his boots?!

Wait, had the Computer just said the Tallest were calling? Here? Now?

It occurred to him that he hadn't reported to them in days, maybe a week. They probably thought he was dead!

"Don't worry, my Tallest! I'm alive! I'm so alive!" he said, rushing forward and sprawling headlong over a hideous ottoman he didn't remember buying.

The huge screen taking up the entirety of the wall across the room switched on to show the glowering, near-identical faces of the two leaders of the Irken Empire—the Almighty Tallest.

They both relaxed in twin thrones, sipping something carbonated and pale purple from wineglasses gripped in their spindly fingers. They lowered their glasses in sync and both groaned at the sight of Zim grinning nervously up at them as he got back to his feet.

"Sleeping on the job, I see," Tallest Red drawled, raising a brow.

His co-ruler, Tallest Purple, downed his drink in one gulp and tossed the glass over his shoulder; Zim heard a smash and a sharp cry of pain offscreen. "What do you want, Zim?"

"My Tallest!" Zim snapped into a quick, left-handed salute. "My apologies for not reporting in, I was... otherwise occupied. But I'm back! Heh, so I can... get on with the mission, now! And stuff."

"We're overjoyed to hear it." Tallest Red peered into his own drink with one eye, swirling the liquid.
"But you know, you're too late."

Zim blinked, his salute stuck in place. "Eh?"

"Oh, yeah!" Tallest Purple piped up. "Didn't you hear? While you were gone, Invader Skoodge moved into your basement and took over your couch!"

Red nudged him. "You mean the planet. He took over Zim's planet."

"Well, yeah. That and the couch."

Zim's thoughts seemed to be wallowing in thick slorrbeast honey and it took him a moment to speak. "He moved in where?" He whirled around to face his couch.

Sure enough, there lay ugly, pudgy, smelly Invader Skoodge. He was wearing his food-stained uniform as always and rested with his gross head propped up on one arm and his elbow nestled on one of Zim's good pillows. He looked Zim straight in the eye and made finger guns at him.

"'Sup," he said.

"What is this madness?! Computer!" Zim shouted. "I want Skoodge out of my house at once!"

"No can do, Master," the Computer said. "Oh, sorry. I mean Zim. Skoodge owns the entire house now. He signed the lease and everything. We all must serve our new Skoodge overlord."

"I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you to leave."

Onscreen, Purple leaned forward and steepled his fingertips. "Don't worry, we've found a nice little shack for you to live out the rest of your miserable days, over by the City Cess Pool! Won't that be nice? Yeah!" He punctuated the last word with a punch to the air.

"We even got you a roommate!" Tallest Red said, and clapped his hands twice.

A hatch in the ceiling slid open and out fell a ghostly white turret, landing on the floor with a clatter where it teetered on its three legs before righting itself. It aimed its bright red targeting beam directly between Zim's eyes.

"Hello, friend," it said.

Zim shrieked, diving to hide behind the armrest of the couch (and shoving Skoodge onto the floor for good measure). "Get that thing away from me! That is not my roommate!"

"Why not?" Red asked. "Don't be rude, she's nice. Anyway, you can't come back to the Empire after forfeiting your mission like this. It's embarrassing. I don't think you're even qualified to be a fry cook anymore, Zim, let alone an Invader."

"And you probably shouldn't even go back out in public after this," Purple added.

Zim took shuddering breaths, digging his claws into his cheeks. "I didn't forfeit! I was captured!"

"A likely story," his soon-to-be-roommate commented in its childlike voice.

"No one asked you!" Zim spat.

Purple shrugged. "Well Zim, this's been great, but we should go now. Donuts to eat and space ejections to watch, you know. Have fun living in the shack!"
The screen started to fizzle out.

"No! No!" Zim darted out from his cover, skirting around the turret, and hammered on the staticky screen with his fists. "Come back! I've got plans! Oh such plans do I have! MY TALLEST!"

"Shut up, Zim, they can hear you from Horkus 6! And those guys are dead!" Tallest Red's voice said from the screen. "You're just gonna have to face it and make do with the Cess Pool, because you're gonna be there for a long—"

"—LONG time."

The world went silent.

*That* wasn't Tallest Red's voice.

And it wasn't Tallest Purple's, either. Or the Computer's.

Zim's every muscle tensed, his heart racing, and he backed away slowly toward the front door.

"Not so fast, little bug. I don't think you've quite realized that you're not done with your testing."

The door was gone. Zim turned on his heel and ran.

He didn't know where, but his living room was big, and if he could just get to one of his hidden elevators he could escape down into his base—

"Running? Where will you go?"

There was a wall in front of him, he spun around and changed direction in an instant—where were the entrances?! The end table, or the trash can, or the toilet, *any* of them, where—? He couldn't be lost in his own house—

"No, no, I'm afraid I can't let you wander off again. What a waste of good Science that would be."

"Sorry about this, Master," Zim's own Computer muttered, and the floor pitched under his feet. Zim screeched to a halt. Around him, a circle of gleaming metallic claws descended from the ceiling and reared like cobras. He nearly tumbled right into one of them but caught himself just in time and leaped back.

"I've studied your eye," the Voice said. "Now shall we find out what your heart is made of?"

"Help!" The scream tore from Zim's throat, his gaze locked on the nearest claw. "Help! Skoodge! GIR! DIB! Anyone! Help! HELP!"

The claws surged toward him, just as they had so many times before, snapping at his limbs even as he scrambled backwards and tried to bat them away. But instead of going to his face this time, one claw clamped over his shoulder and shook him roughly.

Zim cried out and pushed at it weakly, his chest heaving. "HELP! DIB! DIB! Leave Zim… ALONE…!"

"Zim! Wake up, you idiot!" a muffled voice shouted, and he felt a sharp tug on his bad antennae.

He shrieked.

The claws had taken hold of his ankles and wrists, hoisting him high into the air again with a jolt,
and suddenly he was suspended again, unable to move, and a robot was literally pulling out his antennae by the roots—

Someone screamed.

CLANG.

Pain flared up his arms. He fell flat on his face with a harsh ringing sound in his hearing organs and came back to himself with a jerk, looking around frantically.

A wide, noisy room. Turrets. A core with a vibrant blue optic constricted to a point and staring at him in what might have been terror.

No claws anywhere. And not his house.

He allowed himself to breathe. Carefully he pushed himself into a seated position, an action which made his head spin.

Dib stood a few feet away with his back to Zim, slightly stooped over with his hands to his face. He slowly turned and gaped at Zim wide-eyed—he was holding the edge of his sleeve to his left cheek, which now bore two long, bloody scratches.

Zim averted his eye and rubbed the top of his head to ensure that both antenna were still there. They were, more or less. Good.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and narrowed his eye at Dib with a hiss through his teeth. His voice was low. "Do not touch them."

Dib pulled his sleeve away from his face and gawked at the red staining the cloth. "Ach… yeeeah… y'know… you could've just said that instead of trying to tear my face off." He exhaled shakily. "I was just trying to wake you up! You were thrashing around and freaking us out!"

"Well, you were freaking him out, anyway," Wheatley put in, his optic flicking over to Dib. "Not me so much. I mean, I was pretty calm, I have to say."

"Wake me up? Irken Invaders do not sleep." Zim pulled his knees into his chest and wrapped his arms around them. In the corner of his eye, his life clock counted down from two minutes now.

"…Er, could've fooled me, mate," the core said. "Your eyes—er, sorry, eye—was closed and you were droolin'."

"Disgusting," Zim muttered.

Dib frowned and started searching through the messenger bag he wore, likely in search of cloth or band-aids. "Look, were you having a nightmare or something? Huh? You were crying out for me in your sleep. My name, specifically. What was so bad that you wanted my help?" His voice dropped. "…Man, I wish we'd found a first-aid kit or something…"

Zim stuck out his tongue. "Me? Want your help? That's stupid and so's your face."

"My face wasn't stupid until you mutilated it. What's the matter with you, anyway?" Dib demanded, abandoning his search and throwing down the bag. "What happened to you? I've never seen you act like this before! Can't you just pull yourself together for once and—?"

"NOTHING happened to me!" Zim screamed, falling forward and jabbing his finger at the makeshift
bandages covering half his face. "I'M FINE!"

He collapsed onto his side on the catwalk, wheezing. "I'M FINE! DIDN'T YOU KNOW THAT ALL INVADERS LOOK LIKE THIS?! THE NEW IRKEN FASHION IS WALKING AROUND WITH HALF YOUR SIGHT RECEPTORS GONE! HAHAHAHA! IF I SHOWED UP ON IRK RIGHT THIS SECOND THEY WOULDN'T GIVE ME A SECOND GLANCE BECAUSE I'D! JUST! FIT! IN! SO! MUCH!"

The outburst echoed around the enormous area until near silence fell. Even the turrets on the conveyor belt had stopped speaking.

The core stared at him, then glanced up at Dib. "Gotta tell ya, little mate… I think you handled testing a little bit better than this one did, honestly."

Dib pulled a face. "Thanks, Wheatley, great."

The catwalk clanked and scraped under Dib's footfalls as he advanced again. He seemed to tower over Zim, who focused on him blearily. Dib and his robot were still talking, their voices strangely distant and echo-y. And when had Dib gotten so tall? That just wasn't fair.

"Zim, this is getting really old," Dib said. "What's wrong with your PAK, anyway? I usually never see you without it." He reached down and picked up Zim's PAK, looking at it with a mildly curious expression. A stab of rage hit Zim at seeing it in the human's filthy hands but he couldn't will himself to get up and do anything about it.

Suddenly, Dib stopped examining the PAK and stared at Zim, realization dawning in his eyes. "Zim… does this have something to do with the computer? Did GLaDOS do something to your PAK?"

Zim gave an involuntary jerk and curled into a tighter ball. He could see that glaring yellow optic in his mind's eye, staring at him unblinkingly—

Behind him on the catwalk, the core simulated a gasp. "Oh! Oh, OH! No, no, hang on a tick, hold the phone, I saw something like that! I was following you through the test chambers and I happened to see him in testing—I overheard Her talkin' about doing something to his weird backpack thing—"

"Wait, wait, Zim, how much time do you have left?" Dib cut in. "Even if she has done something to that thing, you'll die without it, won't you?"

Some sort of sound rolled out of Zim's mouth but it wasn't really any kind of word. He wasn't sure he could speak anymore, anyway. He couldn't hold onto a single thought without it slipping away into the confused mess of images that made up his current state of mind. He slid his fingers through the catwalk grating and gripped it tightly, anchoring himself, his throat only able to utter harsh consonants. Darkness encroached on his vision and he gave another violent shudder, jarring his hands.

Energy suddenly shot up his spine and surged through his body, slamming him into the ground before lifting him to his feet and ripping his hand off the floor. He stumbled into the catwalk railing and grasped it, gasping with his face mopped in sweat. Shakily he reached behind his back and felt the hard shell of his PAK, firmly attached to his spine once more. Hadn't he told Dib not to do that?!

A spark of joy at being complete once more was followed by horror and the creeping, tingling sensation he had come to recognize, which told him he wanted nothing more than to turn right around, march down the catwalk, and head back to the chamber that housed the gigantic AI running
this place.

*I'm not going*, he thought, antenna flicking back against his scalp and his hands tightening on the railing. *I'm not going back there.*

"All right, what were you saying, Wheatley?" Dib asked, apparently satisfied that Zim was no longer on the verge of death. Wheatley blinked, his optic shifting uncertainly from Dib to Zim.

"Er… well, I saw him," he said, nodding at Zim. "She was talking to him, and I think… She was controlling—"

"SILENCE!" Zim flung himself away from the railing and lashed out with his foot to kick the core, but Dib grabbed his arm and yanked him back so that he fell to the floor and his kick missed. "You're spewing lies!"

"Lies about what?" Dib asked, trying to drag Zim further from Wheatley despite his struggling. "What happened? What'd she do?"

Zim writhed. "Unhand me!" He broke Dib's grip and shoved him against the railing. "You have no idea what you're—!"

"HEY! Can ya'll shut up over there?" someone called. Everyone whirled around to see one of the turrets on the conveyor belt—it looked like a blackened turret skeleton with no white casing and no glowing optic—waving its empty gun panels at them. "Just cuz some of us can't see anything doesn't mean we can't hear ya!"

"Here, here!" agreed the fully-functioning turret next to it.

"Right, that's what I just said!" the broken turret went on. "Hear, hear! You're dang loud!"

Wheatley rolled his optic. "Would you get a load of them? Crap turrets, complaining about other people bein' loud. Unbelievable!"

Secretly Zim was thankful for the interruption. Maybe Dib would forget what they'd been talking about—

"Wheatley, what did you say happened to Zim?" Dib asked, as if nothing had happened at all.

Zim snarled under his breath. His fingers ached from holding onto the railing so tightly but he didn't dare let go, afraid of where his feet might take him. He couldn't even muster up the desire to take his PAK back off. GIR would have to do it yet again.

Where was GIR?!

"He was acting all weird," Wheatley said hesitantly in reply to Dib, nodding his faceplate at Zim. "Well, I guess 'weird' would be a relative term, for him, wouldn't it, but… it's like he was being controlled by *Her*. Like, like She was some kind of puppet master, or someth—"

"Shut UP!" Zim snarled. He jerked away from the railing and before he knew what he was doing he had his PAK legs unfurled and was balancing on their tips, bearing down on the overly-talkative core.

"Whoa, hey, Zim!" Dib said in alarm. Zim ignored him.

Wheatley's optic constricted and he flailed his handles, tipping backwards and rolling on the catwalk
until he came to a stop upside down. "Whoa! Whoa, hey, I was just answerin' a bloody question! He asked a question and I answered! That's all! Right? Yeah? It's not like I'm the one doing that puppet thing to you!" His nervous babble took on an irritated edge. "And I dunno why you're actin' so pouty anyway, it's your fault we're in this whole mess, so—"

"MY FAULT?"

"Yeah, he's right, you know," Dib broke in, reaching down and righting Wheatley without taking his eyes from Zim. "You're the one who broke into my house, in the middle of the night, and kidnapped him in the first place."

Zim grit his teeth. "So?"

"And you threw me out a window!" Wheatley said.

"And then you chased us all the way to Mystical Hill—"

"Right, but not before he bloody tried to take me apart!" Wheatley shouted. "Ohhh, I bloody hope someone takes you apart—"

There were metal claws coming from the ceiling, diving toward his face, right to his eye—

A snarl tore from his throat and the spider legs snapped back into his PAK. He dove forward, lunging at the core with every intention of ripping the thing apart for good this time, and Dib, eyes widening, pulled the core away from him—

Agony spiked up Zim's leg from his knee and he gave a choked cry, vision going white for a split second. He lay sprawled on the catwalk. He had missed the landing on his leg braces.

Both Dib and Wheatley stared at him.

"…Er. Was that… too far?" Wheatley asked awkwardly. He glanced up at Dib, who shrugged.

"He's not usually this sensitive," he said, and cautiously approached Zim once again. "So… she can control you? Really? That's what you've been trying to hide from us all this time?"

"Do not get your filthy blood near me," Zim growled, flinching away.

"Man, Zim." Dib paused in front of Zim, considering him and pressing his sleeve to the slashes on his cheek again. "I had no idea about that. I'm… sorry, I guess."

Hesitating for another moment, he finally extended his hand, clearly intending for Zim to take it. Zim's jaw tightened and he shoved the hand away before grabbing the railing and climbing back to his feet himself, swaying at the pain in his knee and dusting himself off—not that it did any good.

Dib watched quietly. "So… what really happened to your eye?"

Zim's voice was cold. "Nothing, dirt-child. I'm perfectly normal."

"Don't be stupid," Dib said. "You are not."

Zim sneered. "You would say that, Dib-thing. What do you know of being normal?" He reached into his pocket, dug out the tiny generator he'd stashed there, and pressed it into Dib's hand. "There! And now I'm done with this."

"What? But we've still got a bunch to go! And don't change the subject!" Dib dropped the generator
into his own pocket and went on, "Zim, how is she even doing that to you? You must know, right?"

Zim rolled his shoulders and stuck out his chin. "How is who doing what?"

Tossing up his hands, Dib turned away again. "You know what? Forget it. I don't care. We've got better things to do. You can just deal with all that weirdness on your own."

"Am I the weirdness?" GIR piped up enthusiastically, dropping onto the catwalk from who-knows where. Zim patted him on the head and glared at Dib and Wheatley.

"No, GIR. Everything else is, and I hate it."

When she finally got out of this place for good, she was never setting foot in another elevator again.

Chell stood pressed into the elevator wall, arms crossed, keeping her face turned to the side to avoid eye contact with her companion. She hadn't realized that these lifts could even hold more than one occupant. Yet here she was, sharing the ride with the very same robot that had gotten her and Gaz into this whole mess.

She scowled, her nose wrinkling. The least she could've done was shoot it in the eye when they'd last met. She would have, if Gaz hadn't stopped her. Now they were all stuck down here.

If only the robot would leave her alone. But he seemed intent on following her everywhere. Chell was positive that she was watching through that optic at times, too, making her doubly glad that the robot hadn't witnessed her brief meeting with Gaz.

The elevator slid to a stop and the doors opened with a low chime. The blue-eyed robot (She had referred to him as Blue, which was likely not his real name, but Chell didn't have anything better to call him) shuffled out and Chell followed, stepping lightly.

"I thought that this would be the best place for you to continue your search. Apologies for not being able to send you to the room directly." Her voice issued from a nearby intercom, tinny and grainy like it had been during Chell's first escape from the test chambers so long ago. "This was the last place the creature was seen, but it seems that someone has broken that particular elevator shaft. They smashed it with some sort of blunt object. Perhaps their head."

Blue gurgled something and glanced at Chell. She refused to look at him and instead set off down the hall toward a door.

"One moment, before you go in there," She spoke up again. "You may need to do some... convincing to get the alien to come with you without being decapitated, or perhaps skewered. As both of you have the conversational abilities of table salt, you will need something besides speech—so take this."

Blue let out a startled squawk as a compartment in his arm slid open and something reddish and circular fell out, hitting the floor with a papery sound and rolling on its edge before falling flat. Chell bent down and picked it up with her fingertips.

It was oblong, raspberry red, dry, and brittle, as though it was meant to be kept damp but had been dried out.

"When you find him, show him that, but don't return it. I'm sure he'd follow you anywhere to get it back. After all, organic creatures seem to have an absurd fondness for keeping both of their eyes."
Chell recoiled, nearly dropping the round thing.

*She*… had taken one of the alien's *eyes*? *Why?*

Biting back her nausea, she swallowed the lump in her throat and headed on. She had to keep the eye gripped in one hand. Nowhere else to put it, since she'd lost her backpack and satchel.

They reached the circular door leading to the room. It was only then that Chell realized where they were. Blue opened the door remotely and Chell took a guarded stance, ready to dodge at a second's notice, but only one turret remained standing where there had been a ring of them before. It was in standby mode, its side panels folded neatly, but no red targeting beam shone from its optic.

"Oh. Hello," it said as Chell entered the room. "Did you come to hear another song? Choir practice is long over, friend."

No sign of Zim here now. Chell marched across the room to the other door, which Blue opened at her touch, but when she reached the hall outside she stopped short.

It was deserted. Chell remembered leaving that prophetic turret out here earlier when she and Gaz had encountered the turret choir, but it had vanished. Her heart sank. There would be no seeking advice from it this time.

She stood in the spot where she'd left it and stared down the empty hall. It looked like every other hallway in this place.

Zim could be anywhere. *Dib* could be held in testing anywhere. Gaz, hopefully, had heeded her warning to go hide in Extended Relaxation, though knowing Gaz that was a little doubtful.

*So what do I do now?*

Where could that turret have *gone*? And would it have given any sort of coherent help anyway?

Her eyes flicked up to the empty management rail above, where she and Gaz had first met Nick. For a split second she imagined Wheatley hanging up there, chatting away as he always did.

"Well, I was fairly certain that turret could give us directions, but it looks like she's scarpered. Can't blame her, honestly, I wouldn't stick around here either. Right… Now, if I were an ugly little man from Mars, where would I go… Er, this is a little bit of a stretch for me to think about, since I am exactly none of those things—not ugly, not a man, not from Mars, not little… Well, okay, maybe I am sort of little, but either way, we'll need another plan. Give me a minute. But, erm, have you got any ideas…?"

Chell shook her head so vigorously that Blue started forward with a *bleep* of mild concern, but she brushed him off and squared her shoulders. Why was his voice in her head? How had she allowed him to ingrain himself so deeply into her mind?

Wheatley was *not* here to come up with some off-the-wall plan that she would never have thought of or considered on her own. This was more like the first time, the old days she'd spent running around the facility looking for a way out—though even then, she'd been able to follow the messages and path laid out by some clever benefactor of the past. Presumably the same person who had left the vibrant murals on the walls.

Vaguely, she hoped that person had made it out of here okay. But probably not.

"I don't know how you expect to catch an alien by standing around and doing nothing," the Voice
said from a nearby speaker.

Chell grit her teeth. Her best plan so far was still to wander around until she stumbled across where Dib was being kept, grab him, find Gaz, and make a break for it back up the elevator shaft they’d arrived through. Which wasn’t really much to go on. Even Wheatley would have cringed at the lack of planning in that plan, but it was all she had.

"If the creature isn't here, then you will have to—" She broke off for a full second. "...Oh, that is unusual. You'll have to excuse me. I'll be right back."

The Voice went silent, and Chell was left with nothing but a nonverbal robot for company as her ears filled with the last sound she had ever expected to hear in this place.

It seemed that everything had gone wrong recently.

And now, to top matters off, the phone was ringing.

The phone. Here.

It was only when humans were added to the equation that She found Herself being caught off-guard. In just a few short days this had happened again and again, one thing after another, and Her patience —of which there was, admittedly, a severely limited supply in the first place—had worn thin long ago.

First, the boy and that metal ball had materialized in Her chamber with no warning. Then, concrete evidence of the existence of extraterrestrial life had been shoved under Her figurative nose and She had just been about to begin the really interesting experiments. And then, every. Single. One. Of Her prisoners had vanished into the halls of Aperture without so much as a trace.

And then she had shown up out of nowhere, ponytail and all, as if the entire facility had been thrown back in time. But this was just the icing on the terrible, terrible cake.

The repetitive, hollow sound of the ringing phone beat an eerie chorus of echoes bouncing off the walls of Her chamber. It was likely ringing over the intercom through the entire facility, meaning the fugitives could hear it too and intercept the call if they happened to be near a phone.

Without hesitation She severed the call's connection to the rest of the facility, leaving only Her chamber open to receive it. Now at least no one could eavesdrop on any subsequent conversation.

The phone rang once more. This would be the last ring before it went dead with no response.

She answered it.

"Hello. You have reached the Aperture Laboratories Enrichment Center Helpful Phone Line," She intoned, enunciating each syllable as though reading from cue cards. "If you are calling about shower curtain inquiries or copyrights, press one now. For information on the scientific studies we conduct here daily, press two. For a partial refund on any product from our sentry turret line, press four."

Where was this call coming from? The code indicated that it originated from the Lower Peninsula, though She couldn't fathom who would be calling after so long without contact with the outside world. Unless...

"I demand to know how the phone line of a defunct company is still working!" a booming voice said
on the other end. "And I would like to speak to my children at once. This is Professor Membrane, CEO of Membrane Labs!"

The familiarity of the last phrase hit Her so hard She swayed in Her ceiling mount. She barely even registered Herself saying, "To volunteer for our testing programs, press five. To ask about free eye surgery, press six. If you are having trouble with your new telescopic eyes, press seven."

"I must speak with a real person!" Membrane said. There was a muffled rhythmic sound, as if he was drumming gloved fingertips on a tabletop near the phone's mouthpiece.

"For information on Aperture ski vacations, press eight. For organ donations, press nine."

The drumming paused, then resumed at a greater speed. "Now now, I requested to speak to a human being, not to hear about vacationing organs!"

"If you have no friends or family who would notice if you were to go missing, press zero. If you are filing a lawsuit against Aperture Laboratories, press ten now. To speak to a real person, say 'Neurotoxin.'"

"Neurotoxin," Membrane repeated in a clipped tone.

"Please hold." She paused Her connection and on a whim played a track of that cursed metal ball's failed attempt at writing classical music over the phone. Surely there was no earthly sound more grating to the human ear than that.

She connected to Blue once again, peering through his optic to check that the woman was carrying on with her task. Indeed, she was currently traversing the hall outside of the turret choir practice room, with Blue dutifully keeping pace behind. She activated the intercom nearest the woman.

"I thought you should know, I've just received a call," She said. "It's your old boss. He's fired you from trying to find his son because you're so terrible at it. So I suppose you'll be looking for a new career soon—after you recapture the alien, of course."

The mute lunatic had frozen in place at those words, and didn't move until She was just about to release Her hold on Blue—slowly, the woman turned to stare into Blue's optic, wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape, as though on the verge of saying something. Not that that would ever happen.

She left them and picked up the phone line again with a click.

"Ah! Finally—" Membrane began, but She cut him off.

"Hello, and welcome back to the Aperture Science Helpful Phone Line. We are sorry to inform you that there are no humans available to answer the phone at this time. Your call is extremely important to us. Please hold."

"This is not a helpful phone line—!"

The scientist's protests were drowned out once again by strangled notes that could only be called music in the barest of terms.

She checked on the lunatic again. The woman was now frantically attempting to break into a locked office.

"Haven't you caused enough damage to this facility?" She said. "I'm afraid there's no phone in there, anyway, nor in any of the offices in this area. Besides, it's too late now. Your boss is already
gone. If you wanted to speak with him, you should have said something. Now, would you care to continue on with your task?"

The woman stumbled away from the office door and glared into Blue's optic, shoulders shaking and her chest heaving as she panted. It was more emotion than she usually showed in full view of any camera, especially when she knew that She was watching. She half expected some obnoxious threat or a string of profanity to come tumbling out of the woman's mouth at last, but of course, no such thing happened. Perhaps she really was mute.

She pulled away and opened the phone line once more. "Hello, and welcome back to—"

"If there's no one there, then I'll leave a message!" Membrane snapped.

"If you wish to leave a message, please speak after the beep. However, first a short question and answer session is required for security purposes. Who do you wish to speak to?"

"Anyone who's there," Membrane responded. "However, my records state that Aperture Laboratories suffered a huge accident with no known survivors, save for one that I found and hired a year ago. The facility was filled with toxic gas, killing most everyone inside. And this was followed by a cave-in, blocking off all entrances and exits. The air inside most of the facility is so poisonous that the building will be unsafe to open for at least five hundred years, so no excavations have been attempted. How many people managed to survive in there?"

This reply was so amusing that She very nearly had to laugh. Yes, in the report She had fabricated, there had been a short note that the facility was unsafe to excavate. Amazing, really, that this alleged "brilliant scientist" took this without question. The air in Aperture was perfectly breathable (as evidenced by the organic, oxygen-inhaling and annoyingly alive fugitives currently scurrying around inside…). Any toxins could be flushed out entirely within minutes.

"What is your business with Aperture Laboratories?" She asked. "We do not take unsolicited offers."

"I'm looking for my children," Membrane said firmly. "I have several sources of varying reliability that place them in the vicinity, possibly within the facility itself."

"Please hold while we contact the Aperture Science Daycare Center. The Enrichment Center thanks you for your patience and would like to remind you that further incidents involving unaccompanied minors in the facility will result in them being put up for adoption to willing employees."

She swayed back and forth slowly, running the scientist's words through Her processor again and again to analyze every word, every inflection.

Children. He had requested the whereabouts of his children. Not prototype, or experiment, as She might have expected—not even offspring. And even more intriguingly, not child, either. He was missing more than one.

He was also missing a large quantity of common sense.

She picked up the line again. "Welcome back. The Aperture Science Daycare Center has been closed indefinitely and contains no unidentified children."

"Is there anyone at all still living in that facility?" Membrane demanded.

"Of course. The Enrichment Center is fully staffed."

"I don't see how. Not after that accident. And I thought I was speaking to a recording?"
"The Enrichment Center requires an explanation as to why you called this number and how you found it. We also need your full name and any known ties you may have to Black Mesa."

"Black Mesa went under many years ago," Membrane said. "I have nothing to do with that company! Their experiments involving extraterrestrial life backfired, as of course there is no such thing. As for my full name, it's Professor Roger Scolex Membrane. My tracking equipment has located both my son and daughter in the Upper Peninsula, and I received a tip that they are trapped in Aperture. They respond to the names Dib and Gaz, respectively. If any information about them surfaces, I expect to be notified at once! These children are vital assets to the Membrane empire, and they will be returned immediately! If I hear no word about them in two days I will be sending a team of investigators to find out what's really happening up there!"

There was a thunk, and the scientist hung up with what most people would consider excess force.

Silence rang for a moment, save for the angry hum that emanated from Her processor. What did the man think he was doing, calling here and making threats against Her? He had already sent the woman down here after his little science experiment. He should have given up when she failed to return. How had he even found this number? She had been sure to wipe any contact information from all online records.

Had the child managed to get a message out somehow? That shouldn't be possible—She still had his communication watch, and though he may still have that wretched invisibility suit with him, he shouldn't have any way to contact the outside world.

She considered what She'd just heard. Could there possibly be a second human child running around in the facility unnoticed? How could that be possible without help?

Her optic constricted slightly, the hood over Her face narrowing. If the boy had help from the metal ball, then the girl must have been helped by someone else who was accustomed to sneaking around the halls.

She pulled backward and opened one of the files She was in the process of organizing—a collection of Her missing alien's most recent memories of Earth. They were jumbled, somewhat distorted, occasionally corrupted, and difficult to sort through. Briefly She lamented the fact that She couldn't have caught a more organized extraterrestrial. There was also the fact that these weren't all of the alien's memories, just the ones he'd decided to save digitally for one reason or another. It was likely that if he didn't consider something or someone to be important, it wouldn't be there. This may not even be helpful either way—apparently he hadn't thought his most recent memories were worth saving (or he just hadn't had the chance to). The last stored memory was from over a month ago.

She sifted through them, combing back and forth through time, until She landed on one in particular and drew up short.

With the slightest of hesitations, She accessed it.

She found herself looking down on some sort of extraordinarily purple laboratory area.

The black-haired boy was there, suspended helplessly in a glass sphere full of bubbling liquid. He stared in shock at the person who had just dropped into the scene from above. It was a girl of about his age or perhaps younger, her violet hair framing her face in spikes and her feet planted firmly as she squinted upwards, straight into the alien's eyes, utterly and totally without fear.

She felt Her mouth open wide, the alien's migraine-inducing voice issuing from it.
"Dib! You've really sunk low if you think your little sister can help you. I made that containment chamber myself. I would destroy you right now if I didn't expect to get so much amusement from watching you try to get him out."

This taunt seemed to anger the girl. She turned, clenched her fists, and gave a light kick to the sphere. The glass cracked and splintered outward before the pressure inside became too great and it shattered.

The alien backed away, screaming, but too late. The memory fizzled out as a wave of purple fluid crashed over him, and the two human children got away.

She surfaced from the foreign memory with the feeling of emerging from deep water, every circuit buzzing as though She really had been drowned in some extraterrestrial liquid.

So the boy did have a sister. And she was here, too, somewhere.

It was time to give the mute lunatic another call.
The hollow sound beat through the air, resonating through the irritating background chatter of turrets going along the conveyor belt. Out of the corner of his eye Zim saw Dib, sitting a few feet away from him on the catwalk again, jerk his head up so abruptly that Zim was vaguely surprised there was no audible snap.

"What's that?" Dib blurted.

"I dunno, little mate." The treacherous metal core sitting nestled next to Dib sounded perplexed. The human hadn't let that robot out of his sight since they had all sat back down, carefully avoiding speaking or even looking at each other. "An alarm of some kind, maybe?"

The word alarm made both of Zim's mismatched antennae twitch uneasily and he tensed. His mind conjured up visions of those blue and orange robots bursting through the wall, grabbing him up and dragging him back to the lair of that… that machine—

Brriiiiiing.

He forced himself to relax. No- no, no, that was no alarm. That was a—

"It's a phone!" Dib was on his feet now, looking around wildly. "Someone's calling this place! Wheatley, where's the nearest phone?!"

"What—? Er, in the turret control center, I would expect, but- but who the bloody heck would be calling this place?!"

Dib didn't answer. Instead he tore past Zim, nearly crawling over him, and took the steps leading to the next catwalk two at a time.

Zim jumped up as well, his lone eye shooting daggers at the human's retreating form. "You DARE climb over ME to get—?!!"

"Zim, shut up!" Dib called back. He ran down the next catwalk, footsteps clanging, and vanished into a room at the back of the wide open space.

Zim shook with barely-suppressed rage before slumping against the railing and sliding back to the floor. "Eh. Fine."

His PAK rested neatly beside him, removed from his back once again by GIR. Zim ran his tongue—still bruised from biting it at some point—over his teeth and let out a hissing breath. His gaze slid over to rest on the blue-eyed core, which was staring at him. Zim grit his teeth and shuffled his feet to draw his knees up to his chest and wrap his arms around them. "What are you looking at?"

The core blinked rapidly and averted his eye. "Nothing! Nothing, ah, sorry! I'm just. Ah. Hoping he comes back soon! Not for any particular reason. Who- who do you suppose is calling here?"
Egh, how in Irk was he supposed to know? He glared at the core. The sight of the thing still made him seethe.

How dare that little idiot ball tell the Dib what had been implanted in his PAK? And now his greatest enemy had knowledge of his greatest weakness? His hands curled. He imagined himself scooping up that metal eye and hoisting it over the railing to watch it tumble down into the darkness, down, down, down…

Movement further down the catwalk yanked him out of the vision and he whipped his head around. Dib had reappeared, heading back toward them slowly, his feet dragging.

"Didn't get to it in time," he said as he reached them. "The ringing stopped right when I got into the control room."

"I wouldn't worry about it, mate," the blue-eyed core said from the ground. "Probably just someone selling something. Y'know, Girl Scout cookies, or something."

Dib didn't look convinced. Before he could sit back down, GIR flew down over their heads, dropping an offline turret directly in front of him before rocketing upward again and clinging to the ceiling, giggling to himself. Dib leaped backwards to avoid being hit by the turret.

"Oh, good, another one!" the core said. "We're almost done getting empathy generators! When we're done with that we'll all have to go back up to the control room—where you just were—to do the second part of my plan. Now, She's probably changed it all up, tryin' to keep people from destroying the turrets like the lady and I did that one time—heh, classic—so we're proooobably gonna have to improvise up there. Don't worry, though, I am an expert improviser."

"All right." Dib sat down but made no move to work on the new turret, leaning against the railing and pressing the hem of his sleeve to the scratches on his left cheek. He leaned over and shoved the turret closer to Zim. "Here, you take this one. I'm still trying to keep my face from bleeding out."

"GIR, get the child another turret," Zim said with a flick of his antenna. "He can work on two because I already said I was done with this."

"Okee!" GIR screeched, blasting off again. He hurtled headlong into the side of a turret on the conveyor belt, knocking it off and falling over the edge with it, vanishing into the darkness with a cheerful whoop.

Dib turned his head slightly to give Zim a sidelong glance.

Zim shrugged. "Eh. He'll be fine."

"Okay, whatever." Dib picked up the white, gun-like object sitting beside him and ran his hands over it as though in a nervous gesture. Zim's lip curled at the sight of it.

That… portal gun. That thing seemed like a weapon that should not be in the hands of the Dib. After all, the human had already attacked him with it and would probably do it again, knowing him. Maybe he should steal it right out of the stink-boy's grubby meat fingers.

Why hadn't he gotten one of those things?

He poked idly at the dead turret Dib had passed to him, then glanced up to catch sight of Dib staring at him. The human jumped and quickly turned away, pressing his sleeve to his face again.

"Silence," Zim said.
"I didn't say anything."

Zim jumped to his feet, arms rigid by his sides, and snapped, "It doesn't work on me if my PAK's off, all right?! I'm in control!"

"I told you I didn't care about that anymore."

"HAH! The day you stop caring about my PAK is the day that—that—" Zim wriggled his fingers, casting about for the perfect comparison, "—that your stupid robot learns to fly!"

Dib glanced at the catwalk railing, then flicked his eyes to Zim, and pulled Wheatley a little closer to himself. "Look, are you gonna keep helping us, or not?"

"No." Zim stood, scooped up his PAK, and marched down the catwalk away from the Dib, heading toward the control room.

"Oh, oh no, are you going in there now?" the core called after him. "Look, just don't touch anything, all right? Do not touch anything in that room! I have still got parts of this plan that we haven't done yet! But we are going to do them, and we'll need that room, so, ah, don't wreck anything in there, all right?"

"We gonna wreck it!" GIR blasted up from below them and dropped onto the catwalk, prancing after Zim.

"No, I literally just said not to touch anything—"

Zim quickened his pace until he couldn't hear the stupid core or the even stupider human any longer and nearly ran into the control room. He slammed his fist onto a little button near the door, which slid closed at once.

Alone. Finally.

He backed into the wall and leaned against it with a long exhale, running one hand down his face and clutching his PAK to his chest.

"I like this place," said a little voice to his side, and he nearly leapt out of his skin. He dropped his PAK and whipped around, claws unsheathed, but it was only GIR. He'd somehow followed Zim into the room undetected.

Zim sheathed his claws at once and stood up straighter. "I don't."

He wandered forward, trying to calm his breathing. The room he'd found himself in was spacious, with boxy consoles lining one wall. Opposite them were wide windows that showed the turret line outside. Past the conveyor belt he could see Dib working on a turret, one of the ones Zim had left behind, with the core looking on. It glanced over at him—Zim flinched and turned away with his hands clasped behind his back. He shuddered and moved away from the windows.

"I don't—I don't know how much longer I can do this, GIR," he said.

GIR peered up at him. "Do wha?"

Zim continued on, his voice dropping lower."PAKs aren't meant for this. I'm not healing correctly…" He reached up and prodded the shorter of his two antennae. It still hadn't finished growing back. The reforming claw in his index finger was even worse off—still nothing more than a short, dull nub embedded in the end of his finger. "Urghh, at this rate I'll get a filthy infection. All the
tampering that computer's done with my PAK seems to have severely hindered my regenerative capabilities."

"Aw, Master, I betcha don't need that old thing anyway!" GIR aimed a kick at the fallen PAK, making Zim wince. "Woo-hoo! You wanna play soccer?!"

"No, not now."

There was a monitor outside the window displaying information on each turret as it passed by. Zim moved back toward it, locking his eye on the screen as though fascinated by the useless data. "GIR…"

His voice was a rasp. He wet his mouth and gulped. "GIR, am I… going to die here?"

"Oooooh," GIR said. Then he grinned. "I DUNNO!"

"Hmmm." Zim gave a sharp nod, his lone eye darkening. "Very well. Nevertheless, I am an Invader. I can't let my own fears get the best of me any longer." He turned, meeting GIR's glowing teal eyes and baring his teeth. "If I am to die, then I'll do it facing that filthy machine and taking her down with me. Piece by piece."

Pounding rang out on the door leading out of the control center, and they both screeched.

"They breakin' into our house!" GIR screamed.

"Zim!" Dib called from outside. "Zim, we're done getting the empathy generators! Let us in!"

Zim cleared his throat and shook his head, pushing past GIR to shuffle back over to the door and press his palm on the button. Dib stepped inside, holding Wheatley the core suspended by the portal gun, and showed Zim a handful of cylinders. "Look, we got ten of them! We might have to get more later, but we still need to figure out a way to use these first."

The core's optic darted around the room.

"Ahhh, it's just like I remember it," he said, in an almost fond tone of voice. "Except the shattered window on the turret scanner is gone. In fact, the entire window on the turret scanner is gone. That's… unfortunate, not sure how we could get into it now."

He was looking at a corner that Zim hadn't even noticed, where the wall curved into the room oddly. It looked as though it housed a separate space, but there seemed to be no windows or doors, or any way to access it at all.

"Do we need to get in there?" Dib asked.

"Well, if we wanted to mess up the turret line, the answer would be yes, probably," Wheatley said. "But we don't have to do that. Would be helpful, but not required. But definitely helpful. Maybe we could find another way of doing it."

"Well? What did you need in here, then?" Zim demanded. He yanked his PAK away from GIR, who had picked it up and set it on his head like a hat.

"Oh! Oh yes, right, well." Wheatley made a sound like he was clearing his throat, then said dramatically, "We're gonna call up the lady."

"Huh? From here?" Dib asked, glancing around the sparse area. He sounded surprised.
Zim made a noise of disgust. "What lady?"

The core pointedly ignored him, responding instead to Dib. "Yep, right from here! I learned about it when I was in charge of—well, when the thing happened." He indicated the windows. "See, there used to be humans working in this area. I guess they did extra quality control for the turrets, or somethin', but sometimes the turrets'd go haywire and there'd be, y'know, accidents. So if they needed a replacement human here, they had a direct line to Extended Relaxation, so they'd call there, wake up one of the humans in storage, and have 'em come work here! So I'm—"

He broke off, his optic drifting to the side. "Hang on. Spacey, I told you, not now, I'm explaining things!" He shook his faceplate. "Sorry about that. Now that my radio connection with Spacey's all fixed up, he keeps trying to talk to me all the time about stars and—er, anyway, I'm gonna try to use that phone line, and then we can call the lady and have her come right here."

"But do we even know she's really there?" Dib asked.

The core waved his upper handle. "Well, while I was runnin' around the facility on my own, I found the computer in charge of logging all the test subjects, and it told me that no tests were running. If she's not in testing, she must be in Relaxation."

"What lady?" Zim asked again.

"But when was that? Zim and I were both in testing," Dib pointed out, gesturing at Zim. "Which must've happened after it told you that. What if your friend's in testing now?"

The core drooped. "...Oh. Er... Well, let's just hope she isn't, and in two ticks we'll know for sure. Now I've just gotta figure out how to do this—put the ol' master hacking skills back to work again—"

"But won't GLaDOS know we're trying to contact her?" Dib said, finally, causing the core to cringe.

"All right, mate, we get it, you don't need to go spouting Her name at every opportunity that presents itself. Honestly. At least save it for some big dramatic moment, can't you?"

"I'm not scared of a name—" Dib began adamantly.

"Anyway, no, the beauty of this messenger thingy is that it's invisible. Well, sort of. She won't notice a thing! Accidents like this were so common back in the day that they didn't want to bother the busy heads of this place, so She won't even be alerted about it!"

Dib sighed. "All right, as long as she doesn't find out where we are." He cast a glance at Zim, brow furrowed, and Zim tensed.

"She won't find out a thing," the core said, an attempt at a cocky smile lighting his optic. "Actually, d'you know what, while I get the message thing up and working, why don't you see what you can do about the turret scanner? Find a way in there. You're pretty good with electronics and computers and such, aren't you? I mean, you cured my twitch and all—" the core's chassis jerked and shot out sparks. "—Well no, never mind, I guess it just comes and goes now—but anyway, point is, you're at least slightly good at those things, aren't you?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Dib said.

The core bobbed his faceplate up and down. "Right, good! So you take care of that, then, and er..." He faced Zim and GIR, narrowing his optic shields. "You two... you should probably do something as well."
Zim nodded. "Yes, of course." With that, he turned his back to all of them and marched to the office window, once again watching the turrets go by.

"Right, well, that's you taken care of," the core said after a pause. "I'll go ahead and get workin' on this, then."

They went quiet save for low, unimportant mutterings about their work. Zim glanced over his shoulder to see Dib messing with the little closed-off booth in the corner, while the core had been placed in front of the consoles along the wall and sat squinting at them.

Zim balanced his PAK on his hip, beckoned for GIR to follow him, and moved to the other end of the room where there was a desk with a phone and a set-up of computer screens. He dropped down into the swivel chair at the desk and spun around in it idly, letting GIR push him in quick circles.

They were just wasting time here. These stupid plans weren't going to work.

The only thing that was ever going to work on that computer was fire, and annihilation. Complete and total annihilation.

Again and again she rammed her shoulder into the door, until at last it burst open and she stumbled into the office. Chell regained her balance at once and lunged at the desk, scrabbling among the yellowed books and papers that littered the surface, scattering them to the floor.

The robot, Blue, stood in the doorway and emitted a questioning gurgle, tipping his "head" to the side as he watched her. He was holding the disembodied alien eye, as Chell didn't have much desire to carry it herself. She didn't so much as look at him.

Phone, phone, phone—Chell ran the thought through her mind, but found nothing. It seemed She had been right. Perhaps there were no phones in these offices.

Trembling, she reached up slowly and tugged her ponytail tighter to her head, letting out a shaky breath. It was far too late, anyway. The phone call was over.

Really, would it even have mattered if she'd managed to get to a phone in time? Would she have been able to force herself, again, to speak aloud in this place, even if it was to Professor Membrane—possibly her one chance of getting everyone out of here alive?

Well, you were able to talk to Gaz down here, she reminded herself. And to Nick as well, though at this point she wasn't sure he counted.

"Bloody heck, mate," Wheatley's voice popped into her mind. "Why didn't you just tell Membrane about all this before you went running off into the blue after us?"

Chell groaned inwardly, sank into the ancient office chair with a harsh creak, and buried her face in her hands.

It was bad enough that Wheatley's voice had stuck with her enough to pop into her head at inopportune times and blurt out remarks. It was worse when this fantasy Wheatley lodged in her brain just happened to be right.

She should have told Membrane everything from the beginning. Surely he had the resources to take care of this himself. She, Chell, may not even have had to get involved at all, and she could have just continued living her life as normal.
But she hadn't told him, she *had* gotten involved, she *was* here now, and she'd even managed to drag another young child into this mess so they could all be trapped down here together. Hooray.

She ground her teeth. *All right. Enough with the self-pity.*

Wishing she'd made different choices had never helped before and it certainly wouldn't help her now. The only thing that could help now was action.

Chell stood up abruptly.

"*Feeling better?*"

The voice—a real one, this time—made her tense, as it always did. Blue edged over to the desk, *Her* voice emanating from somewhere in his frame. "*I just had a fascinating conversation with one Professor Roger Scolex Membrane.*"

Vaguely, it occurred to Chell that she hadn't known Membrane wasn't his first name. But it didn't matter. It didn't matter. She was not listening to any more of *Her* taunts than she could help.

"*I assume you've gathered that he was calling about the boy,*" *She* went on. "*Yes, that boy. And as I mentioned before, he definitely fired you. A shame, really.***"

Fired? Chell's stomach clenched. Well, that wasn't exactly a surprise. She had disappeared without notice, shown up to Membrane's house uninvited, and, as any security footage could easily portray, had evidently taken off with at least one if not both of his children. Hardly grounds for keeping on an employee.

So, she would have to look for new employment when she got out—that is, if the computer was telling the truth. But that was the last thing she needed to worry about right now.

Chell brushed past Blue, emerging back into the hall.

"*The poor man seems to believe that, not only did you fail to recover his son, but—oh, and how ridiculous is this? It appears that he thinks you may have pulled another child of his down here, too.***"

Chell froze.

Blue followed her back out into the hall. "*He says he's missing a daughter as well, by the name of… what was it, again? Oh—Gaz.*"

No.

"*But, of course, that is ridiculous. How could there be a second child lost down here? The man has clearly lost his mind.*"

No—

"*Though, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to perform a thorough search. There's no telling what might turn up. After all, this facility is far too dangerous for a child to be allowed to roam around unsupervised. Why, anything could happen…*"

No, no, no—no—NO—NO—

Chell stumbled into one wall and fell against it, the rough texture scraping against the skin of her hands, and stared wide-eyed at nothing. Her breath caught in her throat.
"Hm. Have I upset you?" She said in a genial tone.

Chell scrambled to her feet, heart beating wildly; for one frantic moment she had no idea what to do, but with a snap decision she lunged forward, snatched the alien's eye from Blue's metal hand, and took off down the hall at a sprint.

She ran until the blue robot was out of sight and then farther until she couldn't hear even a trace of that Voice anymore. And then she crashed through the nearest doorway, and locked it behind her, and only then did she drop to her knees, allowing the glistening eye to fall from her fingers onto the tiled floor, because all she could feel were the walls closing in around her.

"What happened here?" Gaz asked.

The long, dark hallway was littered with debris, causing her to trip more than once. She glanced up at Nick, who had been forced to stop as well—the management rail had been wrenched from the ceiling in places, leaving a treacherous path for any core attempting to head in this direction. Nick had his flashlight on, the bright beam shining from his optic and washing over the floor and walls as he glanced around, taking in the damage.

"Oh, this was just the Boss Lady," he said, turning to Gaz and accidentally shining the light directly into her face. "This is around where I met I.D., and She was trying to chase him down, and stuff. It looks like She almost ripped the whole place down!"

"Yeah. It does," Gaz mused, stepping carefully over a fallen chunk of ceiling. "How are you going to get through?"

"There's another way around, there's always another way around!" the core replied. "But there should be nanobots around here somewhere working on the rail. We could try asking them about the rogue ones, what do you think?"

Gaz let out an impatient sigh, shaking her head. "I don't care. If you think it'll help, then go ahead." She'd barely finished speaking when the core simulated taking a deep breath and turned to the empty hallway.

"HELLOOOOOOOO!" he called.

Gaz's eye twitched and her hands closed into fists.

"Ooooh… nothing. I'll try again!"

"Don't do tha—"

"HELLOOOOOOOOOO!"

"…Uh huh. Did you forget that we're supposed to be keeping quiet?"

"Sorry, sorry!" Nick said. "Hey, if they're not here, we can try another way. Come on, let's go back down—"

He paused, tilting to the side as if listening for something. Then he brightened. "Hey! Hey, hey! They responded! They are here!"

"Great," Gaz said.
Nick turned back to the empty stretch of hallway, his light casting jagged shadows on the walls and his voice echoing in the quiet space. "Hi, nanos. I'm the Happiness Core! And this is my friend, um…" He glanced down at her and said in a stage whisper, "Hey! Whaddaya want me to call you?"

Gaz scowled, slumping against the wall with her arms crossed.

"And this is my friend, Frowny-Face!" Nick announced. "D'you guys think you could help us? We're looking for a little group of rogue nanos—" He broke off. "Oh, no, no, I didn't mean you guys! You guys are doing a wonderful job! I think? Hey—no, I'm not being sarcastic!" He turned to Gaz again, stung. "Why do they think I'm being sarcastic?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should try just getting to the point."

"Okay. Okay, okay. Hey, guys?" he addressed the hall again. "Listen, have you seen any other nanobots around here? Like, a little group of them, probably talking about weird stuff?"

Gaz straightened up, staring at the ceiling in surprise—her ears were filled with bursts of high-pitched buzzing and she could just see the tiniest lights flickering around the broken management rail. It had to be the nanobots, their voices apparently falling into her range of hearing as they all tried to talk at once, clearly frenzied by Nick's question. Too bad she still couldn't understand the dumb things.

"Okay, okay!" Nick backed up a little on the rail. "I hear you—okay, they do sound weird. Not like any of you guys? What's wrong with them? Oh—Well, I'm sorry they're giving you so much trouble! Yes, I'll go talk to them! Could you please tell me where they are?" He paused again. "Ooh! Okay! All right. Talk to you guys later, then! Thanks!"

The scatter of visible lights died away. Nick beamed down at Gaz. "I got 'em! These guys said they're this way!"

"Finally," Gaz muttered, and pushed off from the wall.

Nick spun around on his connector and rushed down the rail back the way they'd come, twisting around as he went to make sure Gaz was following. Which she was, her feet dragging along the floor.

"Over here!" Nick motored over to a circular door set in the wall. "They said this is another way into Relaxation, through here. I'll open the door."

He must have sent some sort of signal to it, because the door swiveled open and granted them access to what lay inside.

"Funny how we were just here," Nick mused as they both entered. "Charles and Gloria might still be around! I guess you'd better hide if they get close, huh?"

Gaz's stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. "Yeah. Guess I'd better."

The Extended Relaxation Center seemed even larger and… lonelier, somehow, than it had been the last time Gaz was here. It wasn't dark like the hallway had been. Dusty shafts of light beamed down from the ceiling high above, like sunlight, almost. But there was no breeze, no feeling in the air like those holes really did lead to the outside. Gaz checked her wristcom, which functioned only as a watch now that it seemed to have permanently lost contact with Dib's communicator.

It was three in the morning. Even the daylight in this place was fake.
"So they're around this area somewhere," Nick said.

"This'll be easy," Gaz deadpanned. She cast her gaze over the broken-down crates and the skeletal metal scaffolding that towered high above and continued as far as she could see. There was no true floor—management rails and catwalks branched out over the space, over which hung an eerie quiet aside from the creaking of metal. The still, musty air smelled of dust, old metal, and mildew.

The only upside to this place being so large was that, though everything looked relatively the same, they didn't seem to be anywhere near the area she, Chell, and Nick had been in before. The last thing she wanted was for her only ally in this place to run across anything… upsetting.

But how were they supposed to find a bunch of tiny little robots in this place?


Gaz followed along the catwalk, and her face was suddenly split by an enormous yawn.

"Hey!" Nick noticed at once, darting back over to her. "You okay? Are you tired?"

"No," Gaz said. She swayed slightly on her feet.

"When was the last time you went in sleep mode? Come onnn, you need to keep your strength up, and to do that I think you need to sleep."

She glared pointedly at him. "I can sleep when I'm dead."

"Oh. Well, okay then, I guess that makes sense?"

Tired or not tired, there was no way she was going to sleep here. Just… the feeling of this place, these old crates, this atmosphere, the heavy sense that if she went to sleep here… she'd never wake up again.

She blinked. Nick had turned down a fork in the catwalk and had stopped short, his frame rigid, staring up at something that Gaz couldn't see. She edged closer. He turned to look at her, optic wide.

"I can hear them," he hissed.

The abrupt shift in his voice shook her, bringing her to a halt.

"…And?" she said.

The core turned back to a small corner between two giant crates which, to Gaz's eyes and ears, appeared empty. "I… don't know," he said slowly. "They all sound so lost. And- and scared."

She'd never heard him sound spooked before. "So… is there no way you can transcribe what they're saying for me, or…?"

"I don't think they even know what they're saying," Nick said. "They're all talking at once, all disjointed and stuff."

Gaz impatiently fiddled with the X-scope perched on her head, for lack of something better to do. "Well, ask them about Dib and that stupid robot! That's what we came here for, remember?"

Nick nodded, slowly at first, then vigorously. "Y-yes! Yep, okay!" He once again simulated taking a deep breath and turned back to the empty area. "Hey- hey, guys? Little, uh, nanos?" He glanced
down at Gaz. "Hey, I think one of them says to call them 017, but I couldn't tell if it was actually talking to me. I'm not sure if they can tell we're even here…"

"017? What does that mean? Is it a serial number?"

"I dunno. Maybe, or maybe they're talking in code!" Nick turned to the invisible bots again. "Hey! 017!"

The effect was immediate. Like before, lights shimmered into existence before blinking out again, though this time Gaz heard nothing. Nick, on the other hand, jumped as though bombarded with noise.

"Hi! Hi there!" he said, sounding extremely pleased. "I'm so glad I got your attention! I'm Nick, the Happiness Core, and this is my best buddy!" He listened for a moment, then glanced down at Gaz again. "They say hi."

Gaz raised an eyebrow, frowning, but said after a moment, "Hey."

"So guys, hey," Nick continued to the nanobots, "we came here looking for you, to ask you something. My friend wants to know if you've seen, uhh…"

"A boy with pointy black hair," Gaz supplied, "probably with a round robot. One like you but with a blue eye."

"A core with a blue eye? That sounds kinda like I.D.!?" Nick said in surprise. He relayed her information to the nanobots, then turned back after listening to their reply. "Okay, they say they haven't seen anything because they don't have visual sensors, or they do, but they didn't before—" Gaz sighed, and Nick hurriedly continued, "But I wasn't finished! It's kinda confusing. Apparently they can see now, but they didn't used to be able to, the way they were before, because Aperture products are always made with optics but products from other companies aren't, so this is… new to them?" His optic narrowed in confusion. "Well, they know what they're talking about, anyway!"

Gaz grit her teeth. "Do they? Because you're not making any sense to me. What do you mean, 'the way they were before'?"

This was their lead? THIS was supposed to lead her to her brother?

"I'm sorry!" Nick said helplessly. "It's like, a bunch of voices at once, but they all sound the same! Some are trying to talk to me, and some are just repeating the same things over and over, and a few are asking for help? Here, I'll—Uh, I'll try to translate what they're saying exactly as they say it, okay? I mean, the things I can catch. Okay…"

Before Gaz could say anything, his optic closed and he sagged on his connector. A second later he jerked upright and his optic snapped open again, wide and fixed on a point far in the distance.

"OH—it's one—of—those—things."

Nick's voice had changed, warbling and staticky and hiking up and down in pitch with every syllable. He was almost frozen in place, still staring off at nothing. "That—explains it. I'll just—take care of that for you, shall I?"

"What does that mean?" Gaz asked.

Nick shuddered but remained fixed in place. "Don't worry. The personality—is dispensable. Just—kill it."
"017. Pleasure to—meet you, drive number—017. Lovely—day we’re having, too."

"Take your power points, but don’t ask again."

The ring around his optic started turning rapidly, alternating between spinning clockwise and counterclockwise. "Fire! Fire, there’s fire—Where am I, what are we—"

"What are you doing?" Gaz demanded. The hairs on the back of her neck and all along her arms stood on end. Something about this… it wasn't right. "What… are you?"

Nick riveted his unseeing gaze on her, his optic shrinking to a tiny, shivering white point.

"What are we?" he repeated. "What are we? What are we? What are we? What are we? What are we? What are—we? What are—"

Gaz's heart pounded in her chest. "You're broken."

There was a pause, while Nick—if it really was still him—continued to stare at her. "Not… broken. Shattered, destroyed. Intentionally… I'm not… I- we can’t…"

"So you can understand me." Gaz walked closer, peering up at Nick. "Who broke you? Dib?"

"...They wanted a tool. A- a- a retrieval. I was good, but—didn't need the… the personality. Ripped out the components, I—re-removed. Was unnecessary. But, fled. Became m-many. But—was like, like ants—a colony, but… some run off—"

"I don't care about ants. I want to know if you know where Dib is. He's the human boy you were supposedly talking about before."

The plate around Nick's eye spun again, his optic growing a hair's breadth larger. "There was… a boy…"

"A boy. Where?"

"And… a robot. Used us—me…"

"And? Where are they now?"

"Gone…"

Gaz's face darkened. "Gone… where."

"Don't know… didn't see…"

Her fists shook for a moment, her jaw clenched. Then she sighed and forced her hands to relax. "Yeah, big surprise, this was a complete waste of time. Come on, Nick, snap out of it and let's go."

The core shook his faceplate and blinked at her. "I don't think I—"

He gave a violent shudder, and fell back into his fixed stare. "It's still a way out," he said. "It's the way out. You can leave and, don't ever come back here, shouldn't have come, shouldn't have brought them—"

"What is it?" Gaz asked at once. "What way out?"

Nick started shaking. His vocal processor hiccuped, his next words coming at a fast pace.
"Teleportation sounds good, if that spider bloke really does catch up to us—I'd say the odds of us ending up somewhere better are pretty high—teleportation it is—Oh no—hide me don't let her see me utmost importance stand in front think of a way out teleportation again? Nononononono recharging can't be pick me up pick me up—"

"Teleportation?" Gaz repeated quietly.

"The box. Use the box."

Gaz slowly looked up, her eyes opening wider. "Dib's spelldrive," she said. "That's what you mean, isn't it? When some robot from this place came and grabbed Zim, I saw it using that to teleport away. If we could find that, and find everyone else, then we're out of here."

"The only way out."

"And do you know where it is?" Gaz fixed her gaze once again on Nick, who still stared at her with that unnerving expression, his optic nothing but a black void with a hint of white in the center.

"She will keep it close, She keeps it very close, to use it. Find it under Her chamber."

"...Under her chamber," Gaz repeated.

"Correct."

"You're talking about the chamber of the evil computer who runs this place and threw Dib in a storage crate, and did… whatever it was you nanobots keep talking about. The drive's under there."

"This is correct…"

"Great," Gaz said. "Can't wait to go looking for it."

Because that's what they had to do now, wasn't it? Go hunting for the stupid spelldrive. When exactly had her life become a series of pointless fetch quests?

But she hadn't gotten the answer to her original question. "And my brother?" she said. "What else do you know about him?"

"A warning…" Nick's voice had dropped to a whisper. "I have a warning…"

"My brother," Gaz glared up at the core. "We came all this way looking for you to ask, and I don't know where else to go. Now, where. Is my BROTHER."

"The box is under Her chamber. If found elsewhere, do not approach. Do not touch. Look… away…"

The voice fizzled out. Nick hung limp, his handlebars drooping and his optic staring, lifeless save for the slight glow it still retained.

Gaz crossed her arms. "So that's it?"

There was no response.

"You said those stupid nanobots would lead us to Dib."

The core still hung immobile.
"You lied."

When the core still made no indication that he heard her, she fixed him with an icy glare. "NICK."

There was a burst of static and Nick jerked on his rail, simulating heavy gasps, his vocal processor glitching slightly. "WhooOOAAa! Whuh happen?" He shook himself. "Wow! I think I dozed off for a second! Did you know that was possible?"

Apparently he'd emerged from his trance. Whether this was an improvement, Gaz wasn't too sure. "Do you remember any of what just happened?"

"Uh…" Nick glanced around. "We were looking for nanobots, weren't we?"

"Yeah, yeah." Gaz leaned against the railing, suddenly overcome with an exhaustion that she had been attempting to keep at bay.

They were no closer to finding Dib. No closer to getting out of here either, if their only escape route was hidden under the boss's chamber.

Maybe it wouldn't be that difficult. There'd be some hidden passageway right to the spot, found by pressing just the right panel or entering a certain combination. It would likely be laden with traps, probably enemies to fight. There'd be a boss battle. The point of no return, either defeat the boss or die trying. That's what any half-decent game developer would do.

Not that this was a game.

How had she gotten into this mess, anyway? When had this all started? Was it from the second she had decided to take Dib's salvaged alien spacecraft and fly Chell to a tiny shack in the middle of a wheat field? Or when she had decided to abandon all logic and follow Chell into the tiny shack—all in order to find her oblivious older brother, who didn't know when to leave well enough alone and had gotten his own self into this mess? Maybe he'd finally learn some sense after all this.

Or maybe he wouldn't, because he'd be dead.

And she would be dead. And Chell would be dead too.

The unexpected thought hit her like a cement mixer and she became very suddenly aware of her heart thudding a little faster, as though the mere concept of death had triggered her body into wanting to stay as far from that state as possible.

She looked back up at Nick, happily chatting away to presumably one of the nanobots, but a different image of him was burned into her mind—a staring, haunted face, a pinprick of an optic, a shuddering voice. Whatever had happened to those nanobots to leave them in that state, this place had been the cause of it.

Dib was really in danger here, wasn't he. Gaz was in danger here. Chell had warned her, when they reached the shack, before they'd dropped down into that elevator shaft.

Because there was a reason Chell couldn't speak down in this place. There was a reason she had become so distraught at the notion of a child being stuck down here, after seeing that brief glimpse of Dib in Gaz's wrist communicator. There was a reason she had put her own life on hold to come to the aid of a complete stranger, flying across the state and leaping down into the depths of the Earth, clearly hating herself for it every step of the way but doing it regardless.

Chell had tensed at every little sound, hidden from cameras, jumped in front of Gaz at the first sign of
danger, sent Gaz on ahead while she lured their pursuers away, and there was a reason for all of it, there was a *reason*, and… and Dib was stuck right in the center of it all.

Chell didn't seem the type to scare easily. And the longer Gaz stayed in this place, the less harmless it seemed. Finally finding Dib would do no good if they didn't have a way out of here.

Gaz's brow creased and it took her a few minutes to realize she was biting her first knuckle. Irritated with herself, she dropped her hand. "All right… we're supposed to find Dib's spelldrive underneath the boss computer's chamber. And if the thing we're looking for is that close to the person we're trying to stay away from, it doesn't leave us with many options," she said. "I *could* try sneaking in, grabbing the drive, and then taking it to Dib and Chell once we find them. But it might be better for us to just find it and use it immediately, so we'd all need to be together when we break into the chamber."

"Who's Chell?" Nick asked.

Gaz winced inwardly. She hadn't meant to reveal Chell's name, though she couldn't imagine why it would matter much anymore. Truthfully she was doing it mostly out of spite. And she definitely hadn't meant to say 'we.' Nick didn't actually want to come with them, did he? Was she going to be surrounded by idiotic chattering robots for the rest of her life?

Instead of acknowledging the question she continued on with her previous train of thought. "But going in all at once would be way more conspicuous than if it was just me."

The choice was to go hunting for Chell and Dib, which she'd had no luck with so far, or to go track down the spelldrive. It was, according to the dubious source of the clearly unhinged nanobots, the 'only way out.' It would at least give them all a better chance of getting out of here than finding Zim's hyperactive robot again and having him fly them all out through another elevator shaft.

Gaz drew herself up. "All right. Let's—"

"This is Turret Production calling Extended Relaxation," a voice said over loudspeakers hidden somewhere in the ceiling, and Gaz went rigid, drawing a sharp intake of breath. She *knew* that voice. She'd been listening for that voice since they'd arrived here.

"If you're hearing this, then come to Turret Production immediately. I repeat: Come to Turret Production immediately!" The voice—Dib's voice—paused. "This isn't a trick. I'm not automated or a robot, I'm real. I'm unlocking the doors to those crates right now—I think. If this actually works. If you're there, you need to come to Turret Production as soon as you can. And don't let yourself be seen!"

Around Gaz, the lights on the storage crates flipped from red to green with a series of beeps and clicks.

"…Oh, and this should turn off the cryosleep procedure," the voice added. There was another *beep.* "There, you should be free to come now. We'll wait here as long as we can. Please hurry."

There was an echoing *clunk* like a phone being hung up, and the intercom went silent. Time seemed to stand still for a moment, dust motes hanging motionless in the air in the dim light filtering in from the ceiling, the entire area soundless except for the slight creaking of metal and the whirring that came from Nick's mechanics.

"Well," the core said. "I have no idea what that was! I guess any test subjects in here can escape now!" He grinned down at her. "You wanna look around here and see if we can find anyone?"
"No. There's been a change of plan." Gaz was already heading in the direction they'd come from. "We're going to Turret Production. Wherever that is."

Chell stood with her back arched and her hands braced against the bathroom sink, arms straight, eyes raised to stare at her own reflection.

The mirror was dirty and smudged except for an uneven area that she had wiped away with her sleeve. Her hair was ragged and was coming out of her ponytail. Her eyes appeared more sunken than they had last time she'd looked, her skin paler. If she came across a stranger who looked like she did now, she would have assumed that they'd been down here for weeks. But it had only been a few days, hadn't it? It couldn't have been much longer, it just—

She dispelled the thought, flipped on the faucet, and scooped rusty water into her mouth. At least the sinks and toilets still functioned. The old employee restroom she'd locked herself in was small and showed its neglect, but it offered a momentary respite from the eye of that robotic "companion."

When she had drunk her fill she scrubbed her hands and face. She turned the water off, wiping off her hands on her jeans, and regarded the round alien eye sitting on top of the paper towel dispenser. Gingerly she picked it up and turned it over to examine the back side.

It was made up of a combination of circuitry and organic-looking nerves, the thickest of which stuck out and appeared to have been neatly severed. Chell's stomach twisted in revulsion. Did any creature deserve that?

The paper towel roll inside the dispenser wasn't completely empty. She pulled out the rest and carefully wrapped up the eye, binding the wrapping over it with a spare hairband from her pants pocket. There, now at least it was somewhat protected. And she no longer had to look at it.

There was a light tap at the outside door along with a concerned, electronic gurgle. Chell's eyes automatically darted around the room in search of another way out. No other doors, no windows, no other openings on the walls. But what about the floors? The ceiling? The ceiling was unreachable, even by climbing on the bathroom sink. The floor was made of large cracked tiles.

Okay, what about a weapon? Or at least some sort of new satchel?

She pushed open the three toilet stalls but found nothing. Then she crouched down and opened the cabinet under the sink, peering into the back. Nothing, again. She was about to pull back out when something made her pause.

Scrawled at the very back of the cabinet, in black paint, was a message. 

Try the tiles. 10 x 3.

Chell caught her breath. She retreated, glancing the back of her head off the cabinet's doorframe, and inspected the floor tiling with new interest, rubbing her head.

She walked to the wall at the end of the room nearest the door and counted down ten tiles, then three over. She stared down at it. It looked entirely unremarkable.

There was another tap at the door, another impatient gurgle. If there was something special about this tile, she needed to find it now. Chell lifted her foot and stomped on the tile with a clack. It scraped against the edges of the ones it was adjacent to and shifted in its spot. Heart pounding, Chell kicked it again, shifting it over enough for her to reach down and, straining, pry it up with her fingertips. She pushed it aside. Underneath was a gaping hole just wide enough for a person about her size to
squeeze through. Some kind of drain?

She peered down into it, but there was nothing but blackness. That could lead anywhere. There was no telling how far of a drop it was, either—and even long fall boots wouldn't save her if she fell straight into acid. And if she actually happened to fall all the way down into Old Aperture, it would take hours to get back out, if she ever found the way back at all.

The chipper, accented voice of Wheatley popped up in her head again. "Right, right, of course, uh… but, it's either that or continue wandering around with that two-legged bowling ball following you. Not the best options, I'm afraid, but I dunno if there's much else you can do."

Crash.

Chell whirled around to see that the bathroom door had been bashed open—the blue robot stood in the doorway, looking somewhat shocked and embarrassed, as though he had underestimated his own strength. His optic fell on Chell, then drifted down to the open drain, then back to her. He let out a trill of alarm.

"Right, time's up! JUMP!"

Regardless of how she might feel about the sudden manifestation of Wheatley in her head, and what that probably meant about her state of mental health, at this moment she was inclined to agree with it. With no more hesitation she stepped forward and slipped into the hole, falling down with the rough sides scraping the fabric of her sleeves.

Above, the robot dashed to the hole and let out a shrill noise. Chell just caught the vibrant blue of his optic—reminding her with a pang so much of another robot with a brilliant blue eye, and another long fall down a similar shaft—before she tumbled down into darkness.

Dib kept his hand on the phone for a long moment after he hung up, his heart beating fast for no reason that he could easily discern. Wheatley looked up at him from the floor, his upper handle held down close to his face.

"So it's- it's done then, is it?" he said. "This is it now. She either comes, or...or she doesn't."

With a conscious effort Dib released the phone and drew his hand away; after a moment's brief pause he rubbed at his eyes under his glasses.

"She can't come if she's in testing," he said, dropping his hands and slumping back in his chair. Or if she's dead.

Man, when had he become so morbid?

"She's not in testing," Wheatley retorted. "First, if she was, she would've escaped by now. Probably. And second, I told you, I checked the computer and he said no tests were running."

"But that was before Zim and I were thrown in testing!" Dib said. He glanced over at the alien, who had vacated the chair and was pacing in circles at the other end of the room, making his weird, high-pitched "Hm!" noises.

"Well obviously She's not gonna be running tests while She's trying to track you lot down," Wheatley responded. "Right? I mean, She's even got those little robots specifically for testing, and what's She using 'em for? She just wants them to find us."
That was true. Maybe Wheatley's test subject friend really was coming now, thanks to Dib's message.

"Then we need to stay here until she gets here," he said, placing his hands on the desk and pushing himself off the chair. "...Or until GLaDOS realizes we're here. Whichever comes first."

Wheatley cringed. "Don't say that, mate, you'll make it happen! Along with saying Her name? Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"I'm just trying to be realistic!" Dib walked over to the window that looked out at the turret production line and pressed his palms to the cool glass. "We're pretty exposed up here, aren't we? And you told me that you and your friend messed up the turret line last time. Won't GLaDOS look for us in here? Worried we'll do the same thing?"

"Er... maybe," Wheatley said uncertainly. "Best not to stay around here for too long, then. Good thing we already got all the empathy generators."

"Dib-Thing!"

Dib jerked back to find Zim standing at his shoulder, a little too close and with his arms crossed over his chest. He'd left his PAK over with GIR.

"What?" Dib said, recoiling a little.

Zim let out a breath. "I've come to a decision. GIR and I are leaving."

"Uh..." Dib's gaze flicked to Wheatley and back. "Leaving where?"

"Leaving here. Going home!"

Dib couldn't help pressing his forehead to the palm of his hand. "Zim, what exactly do you think we've been trying to do this entire time?"

"I have no idea!" Zim snapped. "But I saw what you did just now—you called someone to come here! You gave away our position to the enemy!"

Dib's face twisted in a scowl. "I gave away our position to someone who's supposed to be an ally and can help us break out of here. And I never said you were here. Wheatley and I are the only ones who know where you are."

"LIES!" Zim screeched, making Dib jump. "She knows! She knows where I am! She's going to find us!"

Dib opened his mouth to reply, then stopped and gaped. "Wait. Are you... are you trying to leave so you can lead her away from Wheatley and me?"

"Eh?" Zim stared, looking genuinely taken aback and somewhat horrified. "I? Use myself as bait?"

Dib's shocked expression faded. "Oh. Right."

"Bait? Invader Zim?"

"Right, I get it."

"ME? ZIM? BAIT?"
"I get it, Zim, you were just trying to run away! Good for you!"

Zim let out a sharp breath through his teeth. "I run away from nothing!

Dib raised an eyebrow. "Really? So what's that you were doing when we first bumped into each other here?"

The alien drew himself up higher and raised a finger in the air. "I WAS… escaping."

"Uh huh." Dib left the window and paced back over to the phone, turning his back on Zim. Dumb Irken.

...Though he had a good point. If the computer could somehow control Zim through his PAK, who was to say she couldn't track him down wherever he was? But then, she hadn't found them yet, and they'd already been here a while. How much longer would they have to stay here? When would Wheatley's friend come? And would she?

"Y'know... while we're here, maybe we should try takin' out the turrets again," Wheatley said. "Even if we're not able to get rid of the neurotoxin, at least the turrets would be something. Helpful. Something helpful."

"How?" Dib eyed the turret line again.

"Pick me up, would you?" Wheatley said. "I'm much better at explaining things when I'm not stuck sittin' on the ground, you might've noticed."

Dib obliged almost automatically, picking up his stolen portal gun and scooping the core up with it.

"Right, thanks." Wheatley mimicked clearing his throat. "Well, last time, the lady found a crap turret and stuck it in the scanner, so that the system only kept the crap turrets and tossed out all the y'know, actually functioning ones. Buuuuut now the whole scanner area's been sealed off, and you couldn't find a way inside it."

"Yeah," Dib said. "Okay, so we'll have to think of something else. Any ideas, Zim?"

"For what?" Zim snapped, and Dib found himself wishing that the alien didn't have the attention span of a limp noodle.

"GIR cheered, skipping forward.

"Zim, we're not blowing this place up while we have to wait here for Wheatley's friend."

Wheatley blinked rapidly. "Ah, well, I dunno if we can really say she's my friend, exactly. Seein' as we didn't exactly part on the best of terms—"

"So how do we go about getting rid of the turrets this time?" Dib asked.

The core tipped from side to side in the portal gun's beam, thinking. "Maybe we could push all the turrets on the conveyor belt over? Oh, or we could block the entrance!"

"We could try to find a way to stop the conveyor belt entirely," Dib offered. "Or see if we can just shut off all the machines that assemble them."

"We need an explosion," Zim growled.
A new voice spoke up, then. "Not to agree with stupid Zim, but I second the explosion idea. Blowing stuff up always works."

Dib whirled around, accidentally releasing the portal gun's switch and dropping Wheatley on the floor with a dismayed "Ach!"

His little sister stood framed in the doorway.

She looked like she'd been down here for days, her hair messy, her usual outfit dusty and smudged and the wooden skull pendant missing from around her neck, but it was her. The light glinted off the red lens of Dib's X-scope, which sat perched on her head, along with the canister of gel on her back that Dib himself had brought here with him.

"Gaz," Dib whispered, his mouth completely dry.

"Hey, Dib." The corner of Gaz's mouth tipped up in a humorless half-smile. "Funny running into you here."

She didn't set foot in the room, but stood there and adjusted the canister's strap on her shoulder, ignoring the others staring at her as though she were an apparition.

"Oh, and by the way, I think all those Mysterious Mysteries episodes you recorded got deleted to make room for the thirteen-part documentary on leeches I wanted to watch. Sorry."
It seemed that no sooner had Wheatley hit the metal floor, hard, than he was almost knocked silly again when something landed on top of his frame with a loud clunk. Dib had gone and dropped the portal gun on top of him. After downright dropping him first, of course.

"Oi, watch it!" he snapped, but Dib wasn't listening. He was too busy running to the girl in the doorway.

When Dib reached her he hesitated for a split second and then, to Wheatley's disbelieving eye, flung his arms around her shoulders. He was slightly taller than her, made even taller by his long-fall boots. Wheatley could see how much the girl tensed, her entire body rigid, until Dib pushed away from her and stumbled back.

"Sorry," he gasped, looking stunned at what he'd just done. He was staring at her, wide-eyed. "Sorry, I didn't..." Dib shook his head, and when he spoke again his voice was a croak. "Gaz—what are you doing here? You- you found me."

The name sounded vaguely familiar. Wheatley peered at the girl as she walked into the room, taking in the surroundings with a pointed frown. "It's a long story. And you're not exactly hard to track down, Dib."

Her mouth twitched.

"Ohhh, it's you, isn't it?" Wheatley said from the floor, realization hitting him. "The girl from the house! With the—hang on, didn't you have wings?"

She was wingless this time. Instead, she wore the tank full of corrosive gel and the weird visor thing Dib had been wearing when he'd rescued Wheatley from Zim's house.

That felt like a lifetime ago.

The girl—Gaz—looked down and tapped Wheatley with one foot, ignoring his protest and raising one eyebrow. "So I guess this thing's not dead after all."

As best he could, Wheatley shot her a dirty look. Now he definitely remembered her. And he also remembered how much he had definitely liked not being around her. "No, not dead yet, but it seems like everyone's had a bloody good try lately." His gaze darted to Dib. "What's going on? How come every single person you know is suddenly bloody showin' up down here?"

"Well LOOKIT THAT!" GIR trilled, the bizarre little robot skipping over to the girl and wrapping her in a tight hug. "HIYA!"

Gaz's eyes snapped open in fury. She grabbed GIR's arms and flung him to the side, growling, "Thanks, I'm all hugged out."

"You thought Wheatley was dead?" Dib came forward, rubbing his forehead and still looking shell-shocked. "I called you on my watch, way back before all this—is that what I told you?"
"That's about the only thing you told me," Gaz said.

Dib had gotten a message out? Wheatley hadn't known that. Good to know he'd sent out a message and only managed to say that Wheatley was dead.

Dib's shoulders sagged. "I guess I forgot. A lot's happened since then."

The girl paused as though considering Dib, her gaze lingering on the raw scratches on his cheek. Her face seemed to soften a bit. "Yeah, looks like it."

Dib winced, raising a hand to brush the scratches. "Zim did that," he said, shooting a look at the alien. He shook his head, his eyes sharpening. "But what are you even doing here?! How'd you get here? How did you even find—NYAH!"

A blur of green and orange shoved him to the floor, a green foot slamming into Wheatley and smacking him several feet. Zim, metal backpack in place once more, now stood where Dib had been. He all but frothed at the mouth and jabbed a finger at Gaz, who didn't so much as flicker an eyelid.

"HOW DID YOU FIND US?" he screeched. "How did you track down ZIM?!"

Gaz leaned away from him with a huff. "You're the last person I'd look for down here." She pushed past him and approached Dib again, who was back on his feet and brushing himself off.

"It figures you couldn't leave stupid Zim alone even when you're stuck inside some insane science facility, Dib. But anyway I got your message."

Dib blinked. "Did I… send a message when I called you?"

"Sounds like you sent the message that I was dead, for starters," Wheatley said. He had ended up a distance away from the rest of the group, up against the wall. GIR was looking at him with his head tipped to one side, probably wondering how good of a football he'd make. Wheatley narrowed his optic. "Don't even think about it, mate."

"No, Dib," Gaz said through gritted teeth. "The message you sent over the intercom. You said to come to the turret production room, so I came."

"A likely story," Zim growled, his shoulders rigid and his fists clenched. Four mismatched mechanical spider legs sprouted from his backpack and he rose up on their tips, looming over Gaz and Dib like a hulking beast.

Wait. Mechanical legs? Wheatley started at the sight of them, two of them gray and purple, the other two a stark black and white, looking like—

...Wait. WHAT had Gaz just said?!

His earlier thought forgotten, Wheatley flailed his handles to push himself more upright and stared at Gaz in horror. "Hang on, hang on, you got that message? Wha—that was supposed to go to Extended Relaxation! What were you doin' there?"

"Following a lead," Gaz replied with a shrug.

"W-was anyone else there?" Wheatley asked frantically. "Anyone? Did anyone else hear it?"

"Just Nick."

Wheatley's voice hitched. "Nick? Who's Nick?"
"Wheatley! Calm down!" Dib snapped, and Wheatley fell silent, blinking rapidly. "Gaz, you shouldn't be here. You... you have no idea how dangerous it is."

"I have some idea," Gaz retorted, which left Dib looking alarmed.

"Are you sure no one else heard it?" Wheatley prodded before Dib could say anything. "In Extended Relaxation—you didn't see anyone else there? A lady? Long black hair all tied up on her head? Probably wearing orange, like these guys here? Jumps a lot? And doesn't speak much, or—or at all, actually?"

Gaz tilted her head, fixing Wheatley with a scowl. "No. I saw Chell near there, but she didn't come with me. She just went off with the robot that grabbed Zim earlier."

"She... huh?" Wheatley faltered.

Dib frowned. "Uh, who's Chell?"

"ROBOT! That robot? I hate that guy!" Zim spat. He had retreated from Wheatley's vision.

Wheatley, bewildered, started to ask an important follow-up question, but Dib hurried forward and placed a hand on Gaz's arm. "Gaz, can we talk for a second? Somewhere?"

She shrugged him off. "Why? Do you think we have a lot to talk about?"

"Well—I mean, yeah—"

The girl rolled her eyes. "I thought you were doing something at least a little important here before I walked in. Talking can wait. Besides, you might want to make sure Zim's not about to bring the place down on our heads."

Whipping his head up to face Zim, Dib stiffened. "What are you doing?"

From his position on the floor, Wheatley was at the wrong angle to see what Dib was talking about. He wobbled his lower handle until he tipped over onto his side and was able to see across the room. Zim stood there in an odd display—he was still wearing his PAK, and had the tips of the four metal legs angled at the protruding wall where the master turret had been stored. He was blasting the wall with brilliant blue lasers.

"What... are you doing?" Wheatley said.

Zim looked up from his work to glare at them, his uneven antenna laid flat. "What's it look like?"

"I don't know," Dib said. "I don't think I'll ever know with you."

The lasers from the alien's metal spider legs stopped firing and he aimed a fierce kick at the wall. "I'm trying to get in there!"

"Okay. But, uh, why?"

"To take care of the death-turrets!" Zim snarled, and even from this distance Wheatley could see flecks of spittle flying from his mouth. Ergh, always nice to have a visceral reminder of how disgusting organic things could be. "Did everyone else forget? And now our position's been compromised!"

"Look, mate, first of all, they're just called turrets. Not death turrets," Wheatley said, wishing that someone would come pick him up, because sitting on his side was getting uncomfortable.
"Where do you even pick this stuff up? Do you ever listen to a word anyone says, or what?"

Dib gave a humorless smirk. "No, he doesn't. He makes up entire halves of conversations in his head all the time. I've seen him do it."

As if reading Wheatley's mind, the boy crossed over to the wall and brought him back closer to the others, hoisting him upright so he could balance on his lower handle again. A marked improvement.

Zim, scowling, had turned back to his work. "When I get in here I am setting the death-turrets on you two first."

"But that's... not how it works...?"

"So what's he planning to do if he actually gets in there?" Gaz asked in a deadpan voice.

"Well, that's how we got rid of the turrets last time," Wheatley said. "Y'know back when I did this with the lady. The master turret is in there, or, it was, and it controlled which turrets were kept and which were tossed out. We pulled it out, but that didn't work, so it was my idea—or was it hers?—I'm pretty sure it was mine, to replace it with a crap turret. Mess with the template, you know. That way the system thought the crap turret was the right one. It threw out all the good turrets and let all the bad ones through!" He chuckled. "Brilliant. Definitely my idea."

"So we need a bad turret," Gaz concluded.

Dib glanced at the door leading to the catwalks outside. "One of the defective ones out there?"

"Yep, those are the ones," Wheatley said, bobbing his faceplate up and down.

Zim hissed, causing them all to look at him again. He hadn't made much of a dent in the wall. "ARGH, this stupid—" He backed away from the little alcove, teeth bared, and called, "GIR! GIR! Where are you? Quit messing around and get over here!"

"I got another friend!" the ever-cheerful voice of the two-eyed robot called from somewhere outside. Wheatley hadn't even noticed him leave. Neither had anyone else for that matter, apparently.

The little robot trotted back into the control center with his arms wrapped around another core. This one had an optic comprised of a ring of green-and-white triangles, and his lower optic shutter was lifted in the biggest smile Wheatley had ever seen on a fellow core.

"Ohhhhh no," he groaned. So that was Nick.

"Hi guys! Hey!" Nick the Happiness Core sang from GIR's arms. His eye fell on Gaz. "Frowny-Face! You made it! What's going on? I was waiting outside for a long time, but there's no rail into here that I could find, so—HEY!" He spotted Wheatley and waved his upper handle. "Hey! I.D.! It's me! See? Looks like we both made it outta there! You know, when She was chasing us? Remember that? Man, that was great!"

Wheatley attempted a smile with his optic but it felt more like a grimace. "Agh—yes, Nick, I remember that. Hello, good to see you again..."

"Wait, so who's this?" Dib said. "And why does he remind me of someone?"

"Bloody heck, are you saying you know someone else like him?" Wheatley muttered. "I couldn't even stand the one."
"I missed you too, I.D.!” Nick cheered.

"Enh. Yeah, that's Nick," Gaz said. "He was with Chell and me and helped us destroy the big neurotoxin generator thing. And he led me around the facility. I'm almost glad I found you guys. Any longer with just me and him and I would've lost my mind."

"Don't worry, I'd've helped you find it again!” Nick said.

"What—but—destroying the neurotoxin was my plan!” Wheatley cried, ignoring the other core. "My old plan. Who told you how to do my plan?"

"GIR! Enough with this!” Zim broke in, his voice sharp. "Come get my PAK off again, and break down this disgusting wall!"

"Okee-dokee!” GIR chirped and dropped Nick to the floor, where he rolled over and bumped up against Wheatley.

"Hey, guess what, I've been giving a tour!” he said.

Wheatley gawked at him. "Who in blazes'd want to tour this place?"

GIR skipped over to Zim and yanked the curved metal PAK off, tossing it to the side with a clatter. Zim gave his head a shake as though dispersing a cloud of flies and regarded the little closed-off room again.

"Now, GIR! Blast this!” he said, indicating a spot on the wall with one finger. "Here! Blow it up!"

"Finally!” GIR yelled, and an array of ready-to-fire missiles sprang from the top of his head.

Wheatley's optic constricted by a fraction. "Blow it up?"

"You guys are destroying more things?” Nick said.

Dib jumped forward. "Zim! Wait, you can't just—"

It was too late. The missiles flew and Dib dove for cover, dragging Gaz with him.

The explosion rocked the room, jolting the turret line outside—several of the turrets tumbled off the conveyor belt with cries of alarm—and sent Wheatley crashing into the wall again. He bounced back and tumbled to the floor, dazed.

"Ugh," he said when everything had settled again. "Could've—I coulda done without that."

"Zim! Are you crazy?” Dib demanded, shakily getting back to his feet. "You could've killed us!"

"Psh. Not with that little explosion,” Zim scoffed, kicking aside a bit of metal debris that had landed at his feet. A smoking, jagged hole had been blown in the metal wall, which GIR slipped into with a happy squeak.

"Little help, mate," Wheatley murmured, flicking his gaze to Dib. The boy hefted him up again and sat him back upright on the floor. As if with an afterthought he picked up Nick too, who seemed unfazed from the blast, and set the other core down next to Wheatley.

He rounded on Zim once again. "Yeah, okay, even if it didn't kill us, do you really think GLaDOS isn't going to notice an explosion?”
"Agh, mate—" Wheatley groaned. He went ignored.

"We're trying to hide out here!" Dib continued. "And she's probably keeping a close eye on this place. Turrets are one of her main weapons, so—" He broke off, noticing Zim mocking his words with flapping hand gestures and a rather unflattering facial expression. Dib knit his brows and turned away. "Why do I even bother?"

Gaz stepped closer to Dib with her arms crossed. "If we're likely to get caught, let's just mess this thing up and then get out of here." She looked down at Wheatley. "You said we needed a defective turret?"

"Yes. I would have preferred finding a different way in," Wheatley said, tossing a glare at Zim. "For the record, I was against the whole 'let's just blow it up' thing, but that scaly green guy doesn't listen to me, nooo—"

"Hey!" the scaly green guy in question shouted, poking his head into the smoking hole in the wall after GIR. "This place is empty!"

"Oh, great," Dib said, and turned once again to Wheatley. "What do we do now?"

Wheatley felt a flicker of irritation. How was he supposed to have all the answers?

Get a grip, mate, he told himself. You're good at thinking on your feet. So to speak.

Zim stalked into the little alcove before Wheatley could say a thing, calling back, "How are you supposed to control the turrets from this place?!

Oh for Science's sake— "You can't control the turrets from in there!" Wheatley said in exasperation. "No one can control the turrets! Except for Her, I expect. You really were not listening, were you."

"I need a DEATH-TURRET to do my bidding!"

"This is unbelievable," Wheatley muttered. "Right, well, chances are even if it looks empty, the scanner does still work. So we'll still need a defective turret to put in there. Assuming that trick still works, and all. We might need something else."

"Hey, so wait, you're… trying to mess up the turrets again?" Nick asked, glancing around at the group with a quizzical expression in his optic. "I don't think—"

"I'll go get a defective turret," Dib interrupted, picking up the portal gun from where he'd dropped it earlier. He paused for a second, then added, "Gaz, why don't you come with me?"

Gaz pulled a face. "You just want to talk."

Dib didn't answer, instead looking back down at Wheatley. "You keep an eye on Zim, okay? We'll be right back. Scream if he does something really stupid."

What? Wheatley quaked. "You can't leave us alone with him!" He jerked a handle toward Zim. "You can't! You can't do that, little mate, don't forget what he almost did!"

He'd almost torn Wheatley to pieces, that's what he did. If Dib hadn't snatched him up on time he'd be a goner already. Maybe he could convince the alien to take Nick instead...

"Yeah, I know." Dib replied. He looked over at Zim, who had scrambled out of the master turret's alcove and was watching the conveyor belt outside again. "But I don't think he's up for doing
anything like that again right now. We're not going far, and besides, we'll be able to see what's happening in here from out there."

That was true enough. After a moment's hesitation, Wheatley nodded and squeezed his optic shut.

He heard rather than saw the two humans head across the room and out the door. It slid closed behind them with a quiet whirring sound, which seemed hugely disproportionate to the amount of dread that settled on Wheatley upon hearing it.

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It still didn't feel real.

That Gaz had shown up here, and had settled down to discussing plans with them like she'd been here all along. He closed his eyes, rubbed at them beneath his glasses, and opened them again.

Gaz had stopped at the foot of the stairs leading up to the catwalks near the turret line. Dib swayed for a second, bracing himself against the control center doorway. Somehow he almost thought he'd imagined Gaz. Conjured up an image of her and… somehow… convinced the others she was here too. But she hadn't disappeared. She was real.

"I came here looking for just you and you've gone and joined up with the same freaks as usual," she muttered as soon as he reached her.

The words swam in Dib's head, making less sense the more he thought about them. "You came here looking for me?"

"No, Dib, I'm here to scout out a summer home." Gaz popped open one eye. "Yes, you numbskull, I came here to get you out. So let's get this turret thing and then go."

Dib was astounded. "You know a way out of here?"

"Sort of. I'm working on it."

"But how did you get in here? Who's Chell? And what are you even doing here?"

Gaz seemed to be shaking with anger. "If I have to say it one more time—"

"Okay, okay!" Dib waved his hands in what he hoped was a placating-enough gesture, glancing over his shoulder at the door again. "Sorry. But you really shouldn't be here, Gaz, I'm glad to see you, but you shouldn't have—"

"Shut up."

"Huh?" Dib swung around, taken aback, to see Gaz looking at him with her face contorted in a dark scowl.

"I said shut up. I'm sick of people telling me where I should and shouldn't go. It's my decision, and that is it."

"But Gaz," Dib said weakly. "You're just a kid—"

She snorted. "And you're not?"

That brought him up short, though a reply hovered on the tip of his tongue. I'm not a kid, I'm a science experiment. And what about you?
As if that mattered right now. As if anything mattered now besides the fact that Gaz was in grave danger, and it was his fault.

She apparently took his silence as a victory for her, and crossed her arms with a slight smirk. "Ready to go now? Or have you decided you like it here too much?"

"Of course I want to go, but... how'd you even know I was down here? Did you come here with someone else? And Gaz, how'd you get here? I don't even know where this place is. Wheatley and I teleported here."

Gaz groaned. "Do you want me to try to tell you the whole story? Fine. Yes, I did come with someone else."

"What? ...Who?" Dib asked, perplexed.

"Don't interrupt me," Gaz said. "After you vanished who-knows-where, this woman showed up at our door looking for your stupid robot, but you were both gone. Then when you called me on the watch, she somehow recognized your surroundings and said you were in this deathtrap science facility, and she left to go get you out. So I took your lousy ship, picked her up, and she told me where to go. We ended up at this little shack in the middle of nowhere and came down here." She paused and rubbed at her nose. "That's it. Happy now?"

Dib's head spun with this new information.

The fact that Gaz had gone all that way to find him, not to mention what she must have gone through upon arriving in this place, was almost too much to think about. He would have to focus on that later, because just now it felt like a heavy weight had slammed into his chest as the pieces began to fall into place.

A woman had come looking for Wheatley? A woman who knew what the inside of Aperture looked like? Specifically, the areas that had to do with testing?

"This person you came with," he said carefully. "What was her name?"

"I already told you—Chell. She knows everything about this place. Supposedly."

Hm. Wheatley never had been able to give him the lady's actual name.

Dib's hands shook, and he took in a measured breath. "And... what did she look like?"

"She looks exactly like your robot said, except for the orange part," Gaz said, nodding toward the door to the control room. "Hair tied back and annoyingly silent."

That was all the confirmation Dib needed. It was her. It had to be. The person Wheatley had talked about non-stop—the one he'd befriended, betrayed, and then desperately sought to apologize to.

They'd been on a wild goose chase since he'd saved Wheatley from the Corrupted Cores Bin. The woman had never been trapped here, she'd been on the surface, and she'd been looking for Wheatley just as Wheatley had been looking for her. And somehow it had led her to Dib—and, in his absence, Gaz—

And now she was down here, somewhere. Free. And looking for him.

"Where is she now?" he asked in a rush.
Gaz looked at him askance. "What's it matter to you?"

"I'm asking for Wheatley."

"Hmph. Last I saw, she was heading away from Extended Relaxation, but she was with one of the robots from this place. That's all I know."

And she could be anywhere by now. If she was with a robot, maybe she'd even been captured.

He had to tell Wheatley—but how would he take the news?

And there was something he needed to tell Gaz, now that she was really here with him. Something he could hardly say out loud, didn't want to say out loud, because that might make it real too. He ushered her up the stairs a little, suddenly paranoid about the others in the control room hearing this. He didn't know what he'd do if Zim found out how alike they really were.

"What?" Gaz said, looking a little irritated at being pushed up the stairs.

"Listen, I realized something here," Dib said in a rush, but then was unsure how to continue. What was he supposed to tell her? "Gaz, do you… Do you know if your birthdate is really your birth day?"

Gaz's eyes opened a sliver, giving him her most unimpressed stare yet. "Let me guess. Something hit you on the head down here."

"No, really. Or do you have any weird early memories? I mean really early, like as far back as you can remember—"

"I'm guessing something hit you on the head hard."

"Gaz, this is serious—"

An explosive shout from the control room, easily heard even through the solid metal door, interrupted him. "THAT'S THE DUMBEST PLAN I'VE EVER HEARD!"

It was Zim's voice, of course, and from the sound of it they had about five seconds before things started blowing up. Again.

This discussion would have to wait, and so would grabbing a defective turret. Dib hurried back down the stairs and along the catwalk, Gaz keeping step behind him.

Before they reached the door, he slowed, his eyes fixed on his boots and his voice quiet. "Thanks for coming, Gaz."

His stomach knotted in a lurch of self-loathing. How dare he thank her for throwing herself in danger like this? It wasn't as though she could actually get them out of here. Now he just had someone else to look out for.

And yet, some part of him was overjoyed to see someone so familiar. To know he wasn't as alone as he'd believed.

"You'd better not hug me again," Gaz warned. "Ever. I will end you."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Dib rapped his knuckles on the door and hoped they could hear his knock in there. "Come on, we
"I- I know where they are."

The little core hovered just on the edge of the camera frame, his dull red optic a small flickering point. He looked like he was ready to bolt back down the hall at any moment.

*She* adjusted the camera lens, making sure he noticed the action, and faced it into the core's twitching eye. "Yes?"

He jerked back. "Th-there's humans here, a b-bunch of them, and they- they…" He shuddered, his optic snapping closed for a moment. When he opened it again, his upper optic shutter was narrowed. "I know where you can—where you can find them."

*"Then tell me, before you test my limited patience even further."*

This core was not the best informant. He did not report in often and tended to flee, screaming, if he so much as glimpsed one of Her cameras turned in his direction. Even now, having finally gathered up the nerve to come to Her on his own, he probably didn't have anything to say that She had not already guessed. After all, with the neurotoxin production center out of commission, there was only one other place the talking metal tumor and the human following him around might try to attack.

The core's optic had snapped to the camera. He *almost* looked like he was about to make an angry retort, which was shocking in itself; but he seemed to think better of it, his eye shrinking to a mere dot of light and his frame quivering.

"There's a- a girl," he said. "A human girl, she's b-been to Extended Relaxation a few times and I f-followed her this time, and I heard…" He simulated taking a deep breath. "Th-there was a voice, someone I'd n-never heard before, telling her to go to Turret Production."

Her optic widened a fraction.

The watch She had stolen from the core and the boy, which had at first spewed every word the traitorous metal ball let fall from his vocal processor, had long since fizzled out and revealed only scant information along with a lot of mind-numbing static. She had only gleaned that there was, in fact, some sort of plan, but any other details were lost.

*This* had been their plan? To go to Turret Production and use the defunct messaging system to call Extended Relaxation for the boy's mysterious sister, hoping it would go beneath Her notice?

Only that idiot ball could have come up with something so asinine.

"I see," She said. "And who exactly has been helping them?"

The core froze. "Wh- who- wh-whaaaat?"

"*Who is the one that's been helping these fugitives? I know there must be someone, besides the Intelligence Dampening Sphere. And I am fairly certain you know who they are.*"

"I- I- I—" The core shuddered, seeming to have some sort of inner struggle. "W-why do y-you…?"

She adjusted the camera lens again, zooming in closer on the core's tense face. "*Because I should have something special planned for them.*"

The core quailed, and glanced away. "I- I d-don't know who they are. I don't know."
A low, discontented humming noise emanated from Her processor. "For your sake, little core, I sincerely hope you're not trying to protect anyone. If you truly do not know, then that is all the information I need. And now I have a job for you."

The red-eyed core didn't look like he'd been expecting that. His optic shifted from side to side, uncertain.

"I had been monitoring a certain test subject. She managed to slip away, briefly, but I know where she is. I believe you may even have met her before."

Shakily, the core nodded.

"What I need you to do is find her, and lead her away from Turret Production. By any means necessary—though do not harm her."

He balked. "I h-h-have to- to go… TALK to her?! But- but- but she—but I saw—I saw what she did to—" His voice trailed off and he whimpered, tucking into his outer casing.

"Oh, yes, speaking of that. If you can't do this, then I'm afraid I can't do anything for your… little friend." Her optic was set in a glare, not that the little ball could see it through the camera.

His optic, impossibly, shrunk even smaller. "But- but you said you could f-fix her…"

"I said I would see what I can do. However, you'll find that I am becoming less and less inclined to do much of anything the longer this conversation continues."

The core was silent for a moment, trembling. Then he whispered, "B-b-but how should I…"

"Be creative."

With that, She withdrew from the camera feed, leaving the Fear Core babbling to no one.

"Right, little mate."

Wheatley rolled his optic in the direction of Dib, in as exaggerated a fashion as he could manage. They were all gathered around the desk and office chair, where Dib had sat down after GIR had cheerfully let him and his sister back into the control center. Wheatley and Nick had been set up on the desk, as per Wheatley's request, so at least they were closer to eye level with the rest of the group. Dib sat leaning forward with his hands entwined in his lap, looking agitated about something or other.

Of course, he had plenty to be agitated about, so Wheatley elected not to ask about it and instead continued on with his thought. "And you're sure you didn't just mishear this, are you?" he said. "And that you can trust anything this person says—"

"I'm right here." Gaz, sounding unimpressed, said. "Why don't you talk to me instead of about me."

She fixed him with a narrow-eyed stare Wheatley couldn't read, and he flinched. "And you still haven't told us what Zim was screaming about."

Zim was crouched in the corner next to the circular door leading out of Turret Production, clearly trying to stay as far away from the little alcove he'd blown up as possible. He had not liked the idea Wheatley had suggested while Dib and Gaz were out on the catwalks, which was frustrating because it was a good idea, but there were more important things to think about right now.
"Well, I just—" Wheatley floundered, flicking his eye from Zim, to Dib, then to the girl, and back to Dib. "It's all—it's all just a little bit unbelievable, isn't it? I mean, honestly, you're saying we can't rescue the lady after all, because she's already free and looking for us?"

"I think she's just looking for Dib, actually," the girl said. "We thought you were dead, remember?"

"Sorry about that," Dib put in helpfully.

Wheatley shot him a look of reproach. "But it makes no sense! How could she have bloody gotten out of this place without my help?" He tilted his faceplate and stared at the girl defiantly, daring her to offer some explanation.

Instead of doing that, she shrugged, looking uninterested. "I guess she just didn't need you."

Wheatley's optic constricted. "Didn't… need me? But that's—that's—"

That's ridiculous.

And my worst nightmare come to life.

He shook his handlebars, chiding himself. No, no, that's not it, my worst nightmare is falling down into the flipping abyss below the catwalks, obviously. Or being pecked to pieces by crows. Or, y'know, being fed to a walrus. Terrifying.

But, was it true? Could the lady have gotten out of here on her own, but had come back, and was now wandering around down here like they were? Looking for Dib, of all people, for some reason?!

"But we haven't seen her!" Wheatley blurted out, startling Nick. "We've all been running around down here for ages and we never saw her—obviously, because she's not here! I mean, she is here, but not free. Must still be locked away somewhere, but not in Extended Relaxation or she'd've seen my message. Unless she got lost, I suppose—"

"Wheatley, this place is enormous," Dib broke in. "There's no way we would've just bumped into her on accident."

"I did," the purple girl said.

"Well, I wish she could've come with you." Dib stretched out his feet to the ground and idly turned the swivel chair side-to-side. "We need to figure out what we're doing, fast. Obviously, Chell's not coming."

Wheatley narrowed his optic at the name. That was what the others had started calling the lady. But that wasn't right! The lady wasn't a "Chell," that name didn't fit her at all. She was more like… like… a Gertrude, or something. Yes. Or maybe that lady he'd been able to watch on telly in the cryo-chambers sometimes, with the round killing thing and the name that started with an X.

They weren't even talking about the right person. The lady had never been to the surface.

Dib turned toward him, yanking him out of his thoughts. "Hey, you don't happen to have other parts of your plan you just didn't tell us yet, do you?"

"Err—" Wheatley's mind whirled as he tried to come up with something, anything to tell him, but no epiphany arrived. "...No. Sorry, mate, that was the whole thing. Besides getting rid of the turrets, which is sort of a bonus. We just have to, eh, get the empathy generators hooked up to Her, and all."
"Okay. So we have to somehow hook those up, find Chell, get a turret to put in the scanner, and we have to get out of here." Dib glanced around at Wheatley, Gaz, and Nick. The other two, Zim and GIR, seemed uninclined to take part in the discussion again. "So... does anyone have any suggestions?"

"Check the stats of our party and our collective inventory," Dib's little sister said.

Dib sighed in exasperation. "Gaz, this isn't—"

"—a game?" Gaz finished. "No, but it's the smart thing to do. We need to figure out what we're working with before we can make a plan."

"We're already doing a plan," Wheatley grumbled. "We're doing my plan, and it was going perfectly well until you barged in here."

"Except for the fact that your message didn't reach the person it was meant for," Dib pointed out.

"Details, details," Wheatley muttered.

"I only barged in here because Dib called me," Gaz said, turning her head toward him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Wheatley suppressed a shudder. This little human had deeply unsettled him since he'd first encountered her back at Dib's house. She just—agh, she reminded him so much of Her.

Gaz looked back at Dib. "So, we've got me, plus you and Zim, who share a single brain cell bouncing around between the two of you. And three robots who don't have any brain cells at all. I don't know where Chell ended up, but she's out there somewhere with another robot. I have an idea for something that can get us out of here, if we can find it. I've also got some corrosive gel and this stupid X-scope. What else have we got between us?"

"We've got me," Wheatley put in.

"I counted you as one of the robots with no brains."

"I've got some supplies," Dib said with a glance at his messenger bag, cutting off Wheatley's angry retort.

Gaz snorted. "Great, Dib. Let's save the world with sandwiches."

"Since when were we saving the world here?"

"Listen, can't we just take care of the turrets first?" Wheatley asked, his upper optic shutter still pulled in a frown. "Since we're here, an' all." When no one interrupted him, he continued on in a rush. "And even though you didn't grab a crap turret, I think I've got a better idea! We can use him!"

He gestured his upper handle toward Zim, who shot to his feet at once with his PAK in his arms, mouth pressed into a thin line.

"No! I already said no!" the alien said. "I am not letting that thing scan me!"

"But it would work!" Wheatley insisted. "...I think."

Dib's brow furrowed. "How's that supposed to work?"

"Well, those spider legs he's got. Two of them are made from turret parts, aren't they?" Wheatley's
optic expanded, brightening a bit as he explained. "I mean, that's what it looks like, and I know what turret parts look like, believe me. I've been around 'em all my life. So we put him in there, with the spider legs out, and it should be just enough turret material to make him register in the scanner. All the turrets are made from recycled parts anyway, so it won't notice a difference. With him in there, it'll get rid of all the turrets, not just the good ones, since none will match up!"

"Works for me." Gaz shrugged.

"But why don't we just try the defective turret thing?" Dib asked.

"Like I told you," Wheatley replied, "back when I did this with the lady—"

"Chell," both Dib and Gaz corrected at the same time. Wheatley's optic shutters narrowed a fraction.

"Back when I did this with—Chell," he amended (he would have a right laugh when they finally found the real lady and this name turned out to be completely wrong), "that's what we used, and Nick told me while you two were outside that— that She's gone and set up something to keep that from happening again. Some kind of… what, firewall?" He glanced at Nick for confirmation. Nick just approximated a bright smile and nodded. "Er, yes. I guess. We should try something else."

"So we're just going with that?" Gaz grunted.

Wheatley pulled his upper handle closer to his frame, another spark of irritation fizzling in his processor. "Well, I didn't see you jumping up and down outside to snatch a turret, so unless you want to go back out there and waste more time—"

[Hello! Space Friend! Hi!]

He stopped, the soundless voice ringing in his processor. Aghhh, Spacey, not now…

"Er, hold on," he said, and retreated from the conversation around him. Dib cast him a funny look but the others appeared to ignore him without question. Somewhat reluctantly, he opened up his radio communication. [Right, Spacey, what is it?]

[Hi! Space Friend! Are you in space yet?!!]

Wheatley bit back an audible sigh. [Let's get one thing straight, mate. All right? NO MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT SPACE. Thanks. Now that that's out of the way, did you give anyone that message? About us being stuck down here?]

[Yes! Yes, yes! Dib-Dad called the place! Called A- Aperture!]

Oh.

Wheatley recalled there had been the sound of a phone ringing, earlier, which he never would have thought could have been Dib's father. Whoops.

The Space Core continued on. [He says, he says there's another one. Also. Lost. Lost in Aperture. Angry Girl! Angry. No eyes. She's there too. Didja know that, Space Friend?]

Yep, Wheatley knew that now. He knew that very well, thank you. Maybe Spacey didn't actually have any important updates to give him; Wheatley decided to shift focus. [Here, Spacey, listen. These people here have got it into their heads that the lady—you remember her—is wanderin' around down here looking for us. I've been tellin' them they're crazy, but they won't listen. What do you think I should say?]}
[Oh! Space Lady!] the Space Core responded enthusiastically. [She's good! But sad. Sad for Space Friend, I think. Told her not to cry. 'Cuz you're okay. Right? Space Friend is okay.]

[Crying?] Wheatley said blankly. [When was she crying?]

She never cried. Not even when—and it was a memory that pained him even more than most—she had been hit by Part Five, and was thrown across the chamber by bombs, and had looked up at him with that expression, that expression, that one of pain and betrayal and utter, utter hatred and pure determination—and yeah, sadness—but she hadn’t cried, even when they had both thought her life was at an end and he had fought tooth and nail to kill her and she had fought even harder to survive just a few more seconds, she had never cried.

That moment, her face, was still seared into his mind. He closed his eye against it. But that just made it worse.

[At Dib's house!] the Space Core said, causing Wheatley to jump badly and snap his optic open again. [She cried, at Dib's house. Lookin' for Space Friend there! But Friend was gone. So Lady left.]

Wheatley blinked, wondering if he had hallucinated Spacey's last few lines.

[Hope- hope you see her!] Spacey gurgled. Then he gave an excited cry. [HEY! Hey. Hey. Can you see stars yet? I wanna see stars.]

Wheatley hardly even noticed dropping the connection. The room spun around him, unfocused, as though several gyros in his frame had come loose, and he found himself simulating quick, frantic breaths.

It took him several seconds to even notice Dib crouching in front of him.

"—all right?" Dib was asking, eyes wide with concern. "What happened? Does she know we're here?"

"All the more reason not to scan me!" Zim shrieked. Wheatley could only guess they had been going back and forth on this argument the entire time he was talking to Spacey.

"Wheatley, what's—" Dib started again, but Wheatley interrupted him.

"She- she was at your house!" he said, his voice sounding strangled even to his own aural processors. "The lady—she found Spacey! She was looking for me! She—Ch-Chell?—She was at your house!"

Gaz walked up to them noiselessly, her arms crossed. "What. Have we been telling you."

"So- so that means—" Wheatley's optic, contracted to a point, darted around the room, his optic shields pulled wide. "I've gotta get out of here! I have to go find her! C'mon, mate, pick me up, let's go—"

"But what about the plan?" Dib said, sweeping his hands at the turret line outside.

"Forget the plan!" Wheatley snarled. Dib lowered his arms, looking startled, and a sense of shame crept over Wheatley's processor. "Er. Sorry. But- but little mate, I have to—you know I have to find her. I can't just… this could be…" He shivered. "My only chance. I finally have a chance."

Dib took a breath, glancing around at Gaz and Zim with a questioning look. "We can't all just go out
and run around looking for her," he said. "And I don't want to split up."

"Well she's bloody obviously not coming here—"

"You can take my connector!" Nick piped up next to him. Wheatley had somehow forgotten he was even there. "I couldn't find a way in here, but the connector and the rail should still be right outside the production center! You could take that and go look for her!"

Wheatley straightened up as much as he could on his lower handlebar. "Right, I'll do that then. I'm doing that."

"Talk to the nanobots for directions!" Nick added. "They're so helpful! That's how we ended up here!"

"But—" Dib gaped at Nick, then looked back at Wheatley. His eyes narrowed. "Wheatley, I told you I didn't want to split up."

There was another meaning laced in the words, and Wheatley pulled back into his outer casing. Lovely, another aching memory of his failures gouged into his mind. How wonderful that this one was even more recent.

"I'll come back," he promised. "I'll search where I can and then I'll come back, whether- whether I've found her or not. And then we'll keep going with the plan. And we'll get out. Okay?"

They stared at each other for a long time, Dib frowning in consideration. Wheatley's optic settled on the long scratches on Dib's cheek, courtesy of Zim. He wondered if they still hurt.

Let me go. Please. Please.

Finally Dib looked away, sighing. "I'll take you to the connector," he said, and Wheatley sagged in relief, his thoughts buzzing with excitement and apprehension. "Gaz, you'll have to tell me where it is."

Wheatley stopped listening to the rest of their chatter. He was going to find her. At long, long last, he was going to find her, the lady, who was "Chell" after all. And he'd bring her back to the rest of their ragtag little band hiding out here.

And then he would bring them all out of this place for good.

The tunnel wasn't as long as she had expected, nor did it lead straight into a trap. Well… not an intentional one.

Chell fell from the ceiling in what should have been a controlled crouch. Instead, her booted feet shot forward on the slick floor and she landed on her back hard enough to knock the breath out of her, the long-fall springs on her legs clanging against tile and the small, oblong object she carried falling from her hand. Water from the gaping hole above trickled around her.

Painfully she picked herself up and peered around the room, on high alert for anything else that may pose a threat.

She had arrived in… another bathroom. Sure, okay. The floor, as she had found, was covered in water, the walls and ceiling dotted with dark patches of water damage and rot. The whole place smelled musty. She had to get out of here. If that blue-eyed robot had seen her jump down the hidden drain, then She would know, and She would also know where that drain came out.
Chell was thankful Blue was too wide to follow her down through the tube.

She scooped up the object she had dropped—the alien's eye—the paper towels wrapped around it now partially soaked through. Well, maybe that would moisten the eye, at least. Keeping a tight hold on it, she headed straight for the door leading out.

It was closed. She pushed on it, but it didn't budge and she bit back a sharp curse. Leaning back, she planted a strong kick about a third of the way up the door but, unbalanced now, her foot slipped again on the wet floor and she barely had enough time to brace her fall.

No, no, no, she was getting out of here before anyone came looking for her. Gritting her teeth, she tried again, planting her foot as well as she could, making sure she was as balanced as possible, and putting as much force into her attack as she could muster.

The lock must have been worn down and brittle with age. The door swung wide at her second kick and crashed against the wall. Chell hurried outside to find herself in yet another hallway that looked the same as all the others. No telling where she was now. But she definitely couldn't stay.

She forced the door closed again and ran toward one end of the hall, then another hallway, turning corners and hoping against hope to lose whatever pursuers may be after her.

At least being away from that robot cleared her mind enough that she was able to think about what she should do next. She would have to be even more wary of detection, for one thing, since She would be looking for her. Gaz had to be found as soon as possible and her brother needed to be located and broken out of testing.

If they were both still alive to be found.

Chell's heart lurched and she took a shuddering breath. I'll find them. I'll find them.

I've failed them.

Chell had failed. She'd failed Gaz, failed the girl's brother, the girl's father, and she'd failed herself. After all, hadn't she entrapped herself in this place as thoroughly as she had trapped Gaz? She had never meant to come back here at all.

"Then, er," piped up Wheatley's voice in her head, as though it had decided to take up the role as her internal monologue permanently, "why did you keep the long-fall boots?"

Chell screwed up her eyes, staring straight ahead and taking a steadying breath. Because none of your business, that's why.

Because I fought for my freedom every inch getting out of this place, through blood and sweat, and they're the only things I have to show for it, besides the Companion Cube. And they're useful.

But even now she knew those were not the only reasons.

There was no time for thoughts like that, regardless. She did not have the luxury of doubt. The thing to do now was to run, and keep running, until she was away from this area and she could begin her search anew. If she happened to find Zim down here, maybe She would keep her word and exchange Dib for the alien. Or maybe Chell would be able to convince Zim she was on his side, and he'd help her in tracking the others down.

It was quiet now.
Alone, wandering the derelict halls behind the test chambers of Aperture, the memory of Wheatley was everywhere. The silence and stillness pressed around her like a cold blanket, emphasizing the absence of another voice. Chell found her eyes kept flicking up to the empty management rail above her head.

The core had gotten on her nerves from the very beginning. But despite everything, he had been the one source of color and light and friendliness she had known in this place, where even the walls seemed intent on trying to kill her. His inconsequential babbling about birds and robot ghost stories had been like an anchor, something to keep her mind grounded so she never lost herself in the hopeless maze of the Facility.

He'd been the only friend she could remember. Until, of course, the fateful decision to press that button.

She still wondered what might have happened if she had refused.

What would she do if she saw him again?

Chell's pace slowed without her realizing it. He was down here too, somewhere, alive or dead. What would happen if she found him? She couldn't afford to go looking for him, not now, with two lost children that were supposed to be under her protection. But if he were alive, and she happened to run into him…

Well, then what? Her entire body reeled with the immediate, absolute refusal to accept the idea of bringing Wheatley with them back to the surface. The thought of even being near him, actually near him, brought a sense of revulsion and horror. It was bad enough that memories of his voice were still ringing in her head, worse now that she was back in this environment, alone, and he felt so near that part of her worried she might turn a corner and find herself walking right underneath him.

She froze, for a single instant thinking she had heard the sound of a connector like the ones cores used running along a management rail. She barely breathed. How long she stayed like that, pressed against the wall and listening as hard as she could, she didn't know, but she heard nothing else.

Tentatively, she relaxed and started walking again. Just a trick of the mind. Her hand found the hem of her shirt and balled in a fist around it. Thinking about the core was messing with her head, and she despised the fear response it produced.

There was nothing to fear from Wheatley. Detached from the chassis in the Central AI Chamber, he was absolutely nothing. He posed no threat whatsoever.

And… honestly… if he was even still alive, there was no way he would have been put back on a management rail and allowed to roam free. Chell had seen the video of Her yanking him away from Dib, and She would never give him back up. With at least two known escapees running loose in the facility now, She would keep an iron grip on those she still had imprisoned. It would be extremely unlikely that Chell would be able to get him and Dib out, and she had to choose Dib. Otherwise this trip would have been for nothing. Let Wheatley stay where he belonged.

Her heart grew heavy at the thought. He had helped her, once. He had come back for her. But she had to push onward.

What to do now? She had no guide. No more markings on the wall, no chattering robot, no map—wait. Markings.

If that graffiti had told her to come down the pipe, mightn't it stand to reason that there could be more
Chell switched from a fast getaway to a methodical search, peeking in every room in the hall and checking for obvious notes left behind. She couldn't check through every cranny. Time was not on her side.

Every once in a while she heard it again, the *whirr* of a connector or the creak of metal, and every time she tensed, but refused to be scared into stock-still helplessness again. She would creep toward it, down hallways and around corners, but saw no sign of a core following after her. *Yet.*

Was it real? It couldn't be Nick, as he would have revealed himself by now. And if not him, then why would a core skirt around her, just out of sight, and not confront her or run off to reveal her whereabouts? She couldn't afford to go hunting around for it. Not if it may only be a figment of her starved and worn-out imagination.

"H-hello?" a tremulous voice called as she had this thought, sending shards of ice into her skin. A core with a quivering red optic peered around the corner, its gaze alighting on her before it retreated again.

Chell gave a start, her lips pulling back from her teeth. She *recognized* this core. He was the one from Extended Relaxation, the one who had been with the core that… Well. More importantly, this was the core who had reported them to *Her*, the reason she and Gaz had been separated and Chell captured.

She *knew* she was being watched.

Tensing her shoulders, she marched around the corner and stared the core in the optic, jaw set.

The core looked terrified. Its optic darted in every direction, landing only briefly on her before jumping away again. "I—sorry, I- I came to warn you! I know you're on the run, and- and I came to tell you, the Boss knows where you are!"

A burst of terror sent her heart thudding, but she clamped down on the feeling and forced it away. Of *course* the computer knew where she was, she'd jumped down a drainage pipe and hadn't gone far enough away from it… Still, the knowledge put her on instant alert and she scanned the surrounding area, ears pricked for any sound of metallic footsteps or the telltale flash of a dark blue optic. The blue robot hadn't been able to follow her down the drain she'd fallen through, but there was no stopping him from finding another route to her.

But she got no sign that she was being pursued at all, except by this stammering core here. She regarded it warily. It wasn't running off to go report her, like last time. Maybe it had blown its cover and was too afraid to leave now? Then why had it spoken up at all? Why was it trying to warn her when it was the one that had reported her in the first place? She would have said that this core had lost any leniency Chell might have been willing to grant it, but...

"Y-you have to run!" the core cried, and his optic flicked to his left. "There—um, um, there's a room over this way, that She wanted me to keep you away from. I don't know what's in there, b-but—"

Chell was already running down the hall. If *She* wanted her to stay away from a room, then her hunch about there being something important around here had been correct, and she needed to find it.

The core scooted ahead of her and brandished one handle at a final door at the end of the hallway, the interior dark. "It's th-that one," he said. "Right in there." He held back while she went ahead.
She stopped outside the door, attention caught by something on the ground. There were circular, metal hatches on the floor, two on either side of the doorway. Something urged her to keep away from them, though she couldn't recall what they did. Or, indeed, if they did anything at all, though they must be here for a reason. However, when there was no movement from them, she passed through the door and flipped on the light switch, and realized that she had found what she was looking for.

More or less.

She was in some kind of lab, a spacious room with plenty of work tables and not a computer to be seen. There were storage cubes stacked against the walls and dead turrets fallen to the floor, the room covered in a layer of dust. Assorted plans and blueprints lay scattered over the tables and fallen to the floor.

To her shock, laying on top of a few dusty portal gun blueprints was an actual partially-constructed portal gun—she grabbed it immediately, only to sigh in disappointment. It was dead weight in her hands, a cold piece of metal that lacked the buzz of energy in a working portal device. Nothing happened when she tried touching the levers. She dropped it back on the table and looked, instead, to the walls.

All along the three walls in front of her were loose sketches of the kind she had seen before while in testing, images and nonsensical phrases covering most of the wall-space. Some of the clearest lettering, painted in black, looked like stanzas from a poem or a song she didn't recognize. Clustered around it were drawings that set her teeth on edge.

They were all... *creatures* of some sort, humanoid things rendered in greens and browns with splashes of red for eyes, and their hands rendered with only two fingers. The first figures, or at least the leftmost ones, were drawn tall, but stooped over, with their legs bent at odd angles and a large red orb in the middle of their faces.

But as the drawings circled around the words, the figures distorted, becoming shorter, greener. They lost the third arm. The large red eye became two oblong ones. And in the last few drawings, thin, bug-like antenna sprouted from the heads.

These were more difficult to discern, as they had been scratched out with jagged marks of black paint.

Chell backed away, fighting back an odd, queasy feeling, but unsure what she was looking at. Carefully she unwrapped the damp package she was holding, revealing the oval, raspberry-red alien eye that had been taken from Zim.

This didn't make any sense.

She raised her eyes to read the painted lyrics again, but found they didn't seem to fit with the drawings at all.

'He cried and wept as they led him away to a cage

"Beast that can talk," read the sign

The creatures, they pushed and they prodded his frame
And questioned his story again

'But soon they grew bored of their prey

The beast that can talk

More like a freak or publicity stunt'

Disappointment weighed on her. She had come in here looking for answers, not more questions. Though, what had she expected? The mysterious person who had led her through the facility the first time, she supposed, couldn't be relied on to provide every solution.

But she let the frustration gnaw at her.

The other walls had similar images to what she was used to seeing, sketchy drawings of the perils found in testing. There was an image of what she recognized as a rocket turret, the optic colored with vibrant green paint and the picture captioned with the phrase, 'At least they don't lie…'

There were no more depictions of aliens or monsters. As she pivoted she saw more lyrics scrawled on the walls, some familiar and some not.

'It's only forever, not long at all.'

'Oh, you meant so much, have you given up?'

Why would She have wanted to keep her from coming in here? There didn't seem to be anything much of note in the room besides murals and a non-functional portal gun. Maybe the core had been mistaken? She turned to leave, pulling up short when she saw the words etched around the door. Part of it seemed to be a pointless continuation of the song:

'He cried and broke down the door of the cage

And marched on out

He grabbed a creature by the scruff of his neck, pointing out'

It meant nothing to her. But, written over the door frame, was the phrase that sent her heart hammering into her throat and turned her blood to ice.

'Hello friend,

Welcome home.'

They were only words. They were only words.

She repeated the mantra to herself even as she noticed she was backing away from the door.

They were only words, but they set off the fears living just beneath the surface and she wanted to run again, to sprint from this room and never look back.

Why had she kept the long-fall boots?

Perhaps, deep down, she had always known she would be coming back. Maybe she would always be destined to come back to this place, no matter how far she tried to run.

She pushed herself back up, planting her feet on the gritty floor.
No more running.

She had come here with a job to do. Twice before she had been pulled into this place against her will. But this time, the third, she had come by her own choice. She was here to get Dib. To get Gaz. To help Zim, maybe, if she felt like it. And she was here for herself. Because as long as she ran from this place, it would always hold power over her.

She was here because She—because the boss computer—because GLaDOS—no longer controlled her.

And yes, maybe she was here for Wheatley.

Because she didn't know if she could ever forgive him. But she supposed she had to give him the chance.

The words over the door did hold meaning, but only if she chose to give it to them, and right now she was choosing to leave. With a brisk shake of her hands she squared her shoulders and headed out the door. She needed to leave this area quickly. The core may have been wrong about the room he was supposed to lead her away from, but she didn't think he was wrong about Her knowing where she was, and it was only a matter of time before those two blue and orange robots were after her once again.

Her feet had barely stepped past the room's threshold into the hallway when Chell heard a sound that she recalled from nightmares, a shrill beeping that sent her diving to one side on pure instinct, and it was only then that she saw the blue targeting beam aimed directly at where she'd just been standing. A rocket flew, missing her by a hair and blowing a chunk out of the wall instead; she became aware of a second blue beam aimed at her, and another, and another, and another, and she knew with bone-deep certainty that dodging four active rocket turrets at once was a feat that few people could accomplish.

She backed into the wall, jumping out of the way of another rocket, and another, ducking from the shower of debris that rained down when it hit. At this rate, if the rockets didn't get her, the products of their destruction would.

Possible escape routes flashed through her mind in an instant. She could run back into the room, but there was no other way out. She could dash into one of the rooms along the hall, but would encounter the same problem. Attempting to destroy the turrets was too risky without a way of redirecting the rockets, or even another weapon she could use. The last option was to run all the way down the hall and hope she'd make it.

She'd just told herself no more running. Well, this counted as an exception. When had making rash decisions in dangerous situations ever steered her wrong before?

The toes of her boots clicked against the floor as she ran flat out, throwing herself into a zig-zag pattern in a desperate attempt to avoid the projectiles. Her right leg began to scream with exertion, her limp growing especially pronounced, and an icy chill crawled down her spine at the thought of her leg going out and causing her to trip.

At long, long last she flung herself around a corner, crashing to the floor and landing badly on one wrist. Two more rockets flew by and hit the wall further down the hallway. The whole corridor she'd run through was pockmarked with holes and littered with white and gray rubble.

The turrets fell silent, though four blue beams began roving back and forth across the hall. She wasn't going back that way.
Chell sat up, leaning her back against the wall and breathing hard, closing her eyes against the pain in her wrist and the old injury to her leg. White dust coated her shirt and jeans, and clung to her hair so that it billowed in clouds when she tried to brush it out with her fingers. She puffed her cheeks and let out an angry breath.

*That was a trap.*

Yeah, of course it was a trap. Lured into an empty room and then set upon by *four reactivated rocket turrets*. She noticed, too, that the red-eyed core had been conveniently absent from the hallway during her frantic escape. She'd known immediately that she shouldn't have trusted that weasely little —

Her ears, pricked as they were for any stray noise, once again picked up the faint *whirr* of a core moving away on a management rail down a hall nearby. She climbed to her feet, hands curled tightly by her sides and shifting her weight on her hips to see how her leg was holding up. It still twinged, but it was fine.

She had had *enough* of cores. At least *this* was something she could damage with no weapons to speak of. There was nothing stopping her from ripping that core off the rail and rolling him back down the turret corridor. Not that they'd probably fire at a fellow robot.

Determined now, she advanced in the direction of the sound, turning another corner to see the core perched on the rail and leaning into the hall she'd run down, as if examining the damage. He had his back to her and hadn't noticed her coming.

She stalked toward him and reached out to seize his lower handle, jerking him toward her with a look of poison in her eyes.

"AAAAHHHHH!" the core screamed, wrenching away from her grasp, and Chell released his handle as if the metal had scalded her palm. "LET GO! Let go, I'm not going back to—"

**LET GO! WE'RE IN SPACE!**

The voice *roared* in her head, a sensation like freezing electricity shattering her veins. *A mistake*—

She'd thought she was prepared, but she was *wrong*.

She wanted to clap her hands over her ears but the core had already swung around, vivid blue optic blazing, his panicked words dying in an instant as his vocal processor let out a choking sound and fell silent; she couldn't stay here, couldn't afford to betray a single emotion, a single thought—

His eye had become a pinpoint. Chell's expression, in turn, had regrettably frozen somewhere between complete shock and absolute horror, and she forgot to breathe.

"...O- oh," Wheatley said, his voice very small. "Hello… Ch- Chell."

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**A/N:**

"A Trick of the Tail" by Genesis

"Underground" by David Bowie

"Exile, Vilify" by The National
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